

Walter S. James

DUST DEVIL



ABELARD-SCHUMAN

London and New York

Printed in Great Britain by
BRISTOL TYPESETTING CO., BRISTOL 1 *for*
ABELARD-SCHUMAN LIMITED
38 RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON W.C.1 *and*
404 FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 16

one

LIGE RANDALL, working north at a rough jog, topped a shoulder bluff and saw what he'd come for. It was in thick brush in the draw below him. At first there was only a shimmer of dull, reddish-brown behind a screen of thorn, but when he stared harder, he saw the outlines of the steer. He reined hard. His horse dropped its muzzle to nibble at some dry grass, and he brought its head up sharply.

The steer, grazing upslope, would be out in the open before long, and that suited Randall fine, because he didn't want to spook the animal in cover and then have to go in after him. Thorn like that below him could shred even these thick buzzard-wing chaps he'd brought up from Texas.

He waited. He rolled a cigarette one-handed. He didn't smoke, but he'd long ago learned it was his nature to have to do something while he was waiting. Some of the tobacco blew from the cupped paper in his hand and drifted toward the rear. Good enough, he thought; the steer wouldn't wind him. You had to be careful about things like that when you hunted these steers that never had known their own kin—they were wary and cantankerous.

He hung the unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth and sat quietly with his hands crossed on the applehorn. He sat leather like any cowboy, stirrups deep and shoulders a little slouched. He was of medium height and wiry rather than muscular. He had pushed the brim of

his hat up and back immediately upon coming to a stop, and that helped cool away the sweat on his forehead and let the front lock of his hair, the one he never could comb back decently, fall forward. His hair was black and in the sun had the blue sheen of a crow's wing.

Presently the steer came out of the thorn. It nibbled at some thistle, then moved on, walking lazily, but with its hide quivering as though it were loping. Randall did not smile fully—he seldom did these days—but his mouth relaxed a bit, and he muttered to himself, 'Four years old and fat.'

He gave the animal another few minutes to get further from the brush. If it got itself far enough from the bush, it would forget about the cover and head uphill when chased, staying in the open.

It looked like easy takings, thought Randall; maybe his luck was beginning to turn. Of course, he *could* have worked that animal out of the *brasada* if it had been absolutely necessary, but there was no point in doing things the hard way right now. There'd be plenty of things he'd have to do the hard way in the next year or two.

Yes, easy, he thought. He spat his unlit cigarette to one side. 'All right, horse.'

And now he spurred the chestnut pony downhill, balancing as he rode, keeping himself a part of his mount so that by the slight pressures of his own body he could make it avoid gullies, cholla, and mesquite. The steer, alarmed stretched its neck toward the ridge and began to lope. Randall slipped his rope from the side of the saddle, opened the loop with his forefinger, and shifted the extra coils in his left hand. He continued to zig-zag his horse.

Rough country, this part of New Mexico. Here you were just east of the Rockies and at the edge of the big Llano Estacado, the staked plain that spread eastward

and southward more than a hundred miles, all the way into North Texas. But before the land flattened out to where it could bake like a tortilla under the relentless sun it had shriveled upward into thousands of piñon-dotted bluffs. You could almost call it bad land. But he'd make it do, thought Randall, riding hard and liking the wind in his face. He'd have to make it do. His little outfit south of here, on a patch every bit as rough as this open government land, was just about all he had in the world now—the land, a cabin, a Mexican hand named Epifanio, and a heard of scrub calves.

He was almost upon the steer now. He could hear its hoofs tattooing sharply on the dry earth, and he could see the sand and rock fly, kicked upward, in its wake. He could smell the dry but heavy dung-smell of the animal—a not unpleasant smell to any cattle man . . .

There was the sound of a not too distant rifle shot, filling all the open world in sight. *Tch-kangggg!* it went, and then again: *tch-kangggg! tch-kangggg!* Randall's body moved at the sound of it before his mind could move to think about it. The shot came from the left. He threw himself from the off-side of his horse, which of course made it shy and kick out, and then as he hit the ground, he rolled and found cover. Cover was a clump of cactus. His pistol was already in his hand, though he did not remember drawing it, and he was holding it pointed through the cactus in the direction of the rifle shot.

Now his brain took over, and he felt a little foolish. There was no reason to suppose anyone was shooting at *him*—no reason up in this part of the world, at any rate. There could be a hundred explanations for those rifle shots, maybe ninety of them harmless.

He was looking at the top of a sand ridge from which the sound seemed to have come. He saw some juniper bushes, but no movement near them or among them.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he noticed that the steer he'd been chousing down wasn't moving—in other words, there wasn't any movement at all in that direction where there should have been. He glanced that way quickly. The steer was fallen, crumpled forward, with its moist, soft muzzle against the harsh earth, its eyes glassy and its mouth partly open. Blood was already trickling from the corner of its mouth.

But everything else was still, and there wasn't even a cloud in the hot sky.

Randall lay and listened for a while only to his own breathing. He kept his eyes hard upon the clump of juniper along the ridge. He waited for sign—anything—a branch that seemed to grow the wrong way, a faint drifting of dust along the skyline, a magpie nearby suddenly gliding low away from that ridge. But there was only stillness.

He rose slowly, hat first, half-expecting another shot as he moved. Still nothing but silence. His horse was a few hundred feet away now, grazing indifferently. He sighed, looked all around, and finally holstered his pistol. He dusted himself. He racked his hat backward on his head again. He walked slowly toward the horse, rolling a little as he walked, looking, like any cowboy, a little out of his element on the ground.

He rolled a cigarette, still glancing about now and then, before he mounted. He put the brown shuck into the corner of his mouth, where the feel of it gave him a curious personal contentment.

Now who the devil would shoot a steer? And why? He put his hands lightly on his small hips and stared at the juniper clump.

He rode the horse to the top of the ridge. He dismounted and began to look around by the junipers. The hard ground showed little, but after peering carefully

for a while he could see where a man had lain under the sinewy branches and crimped leaves. He stared at the spot for several drawn moments, looking for anything else not in the open nature of things, and then a shape caught his eye—a too-perfect arc of tiny circle, a line like the edge of a large coin, lying almost concealed under a small dead branch. He bent and picked up a tiny cardboard tab. On it were printed the words: GOLD DUST TOBACCO. He frowned at this for a moment. He knew that this tab was from the purse strings of a cotton tobacco sack, but he never heard of this brand before. He glanced at the ground again. A man had lain prone here and sighted and squeezed off his rifle through the interlaced branches. Then he'd moved off in a hurry, backing and rising, and the cardboard tab, maybe already loose, had caught itself under the twig. That part of it was clear enough, but not much else.

He searched the ground beyond the juniper, downslope. He found some horse sign, but in the dry earth it could have been fresh or days-old. As for the sky line and the horizon, there wasn't so much as a lone buzzard in sight.

He tucked the tobacco tab into his shirt pocket. He mounted his horse, topped the ridge again, and rode downslope to where the dead steer lay. He examined its three bullet wounds, all close together at its shoulder, and they told him nothing.

He stood for a while glaring at the carcass with regret and a slowly rising anger. He'd counted on pig-stringing the animal, then returning with Epifanio to slaughter it and tote the meat back to their lean-to. But if he left it now there'd be nothing but white bones when he returned. And they needed meat, even though it might be sun-dried and leathery, to get them through the coming cold season—meat like this, four years old and fat, not

one of their own scrubby short yearlings. His animals, skinny and sad-eyed though they were, would be the beginning of a new Randall herd; they'd start off the Double Running R brand again, and one day it would be known as readily in this country as it once had been down in the Texas brush.

His anger finally rose high enough to float a soft cuss word from his lips. He shook his head and remounted.

As he dropped into the saddle, he saw movement some distance up the draw where the steer had died. He saw just enough to realize that this was another animal grazing through the cactus, and he almost shouted at his good luck. This foray of his wouldn't be entirely a loss, after all! He had started out this morning to make a circuit of his new land, to cover its perimeter, or as much of it as he could. This had to be done some time, for he had to know what his spread looked like and exactly where its borders were. He was impatient of the task, not wanting to toss away the time in empty riding with so much else to be done. And then he had come to this open government land, which bordered his own upon the north, and he had seen droppings and other cattle sign. He had expected to find mavericks here—bulls and cows he might take for his own—but now, to his surprise, he had cut sign on something even better: this unbranded steer. A maverick steer was almost a contradiction in terms, since whenever an animal was castrated, it was usually branded at the same time. But someone in these parts must have been doing things in his own way, for that contradiction was right in front of his eyes.

Maverick steers, senseless shooting—strange goings-on, all right, but he couldn't stop to study it now.

He rode again, deep in the sweat-dulled leather. He kept his eyes hard upon the steer up the draw. The draw was already narrowing, and some distance ahead it would

become an arroyo and then a canyon that, with hundreds of others, found its way deep into the Sangre de Cristos, miles away but not even distant blue in this high, spring-water air.

For the third time that day he saw movement from the corner of his eye. Now it was something atop the other bluff across the draw. He glanced at it only momentarily. He saw a rider against the sky. Small fellow, light and slender, with a curious straw hat hung back from his head by a thong. And after he turned his eyes toward the steer again he realized suddenly that what he had been looking at was not a fellow at all, but a woman. That had been long, blonde hair under that silly-looking hat. *Was this the person who had fired the shots? A woman?*

No time to wonder about it now. He meant to have that steer. He opened the loop of his rope again, but he couldn't stop wondering, busy as he was. A woman. Women had no call to be in this kind of country, he thought. The nearest town, Tesqua, was maybe twenty miles, and the nearest ranch was the Colter spread, on the other side of the government land. So where did she come from, and why was she here?

The steer was larruping towards a short, flat grassy stretch—good a place as any to lay a rope on it. Randall galloped hard.

What happened then was the kind of thing you talk about on lonely nights in a line camp when the conversation gets around to how often unexpected things can happen in the open. A moment ago he'd been galloping over country rougher than any they could possibly have in West Hades, and his horse had been giving him no more ride than a rocker on a porch. Now, in this flat and level place, the animal found trouble with its feet. A wash or a dog hole, maybe—Randall never did find out.

The horse stumbled and went down with its neck

bowed like a snow-heavy cedar limb. Randall went over the horse's head, and as he hit the ground, his head struck a rock.

He came to slowly, at first in a queer state where he knew he was unconscious, but was unable to break from the darkness and open his eyes. He felt as though he lay weightless on something very soft . . . he thought in some of these moments that it might be his bed back at the Double Running R—the old Double Running R in Texas, his Daddy's spread, the only home he'd known since childhood, until just a few months ago. It was queer all right. It seemed to him Ma was around somewhere, and that was odd because he'd always thought he couldn't remember Ma. Daddy had said she'd died when he was four. He was sure she was around here somewhere, and he was sure she was pretty. He was going to see her if he could just get his eyes open. But at the same time he knew he was dreaming—that was the crazy part of all this . . .

Suddenly he could and did open his eyes. There was white light—too much of it—but nothing else. His head ached. His chest was in a vice. It was painful to breathe deeply.

He waited and after a while there were shapes forming in the white light and presently they began to take on sharper edges. He saw that he lay upon his back where he had fallen from the horse. There was—yes, there was a woman bending over him—a pretty young woman—a girl. Long blonde hair and a fool straw hat shoved back to her shoulder blades and hanging by a cord from her neck. She was handing him something—a hat, his own hat. She was trying to feed him water out of his own hat.

He tried to speak, and a terrible pain shot through his chest.

'Don't talk!' She had a low voice, cool as mountain

water. She formed her words the way people do who have gone to school. 'We'll get you to a doctor soon,' she said.

He stared up at her. She looked to be eighteen or twenty. Mighty young and fresh, at any rate. Woman-delicate in the way she moved, but yet there was a quickness, a sharpness to her eyes that, he guessed, might turn to mischief at a moment's notice.

He sipped water, and most of it dribbled over his chin. He was grateful for it. He noticed that the girl had her hand under the back of his neck, and he liked the feel of it there.

She took the hat away. 'That better?' He nodded; it wasn't as painful as speaking. 'Lucky we're near a spring—and I knew where it was.'

'Got to . . . got to get that steer—'

'Lie back, now! Don't try to get up, do you understand?'

That made him try even harder to sit up. That was when the Randalls liked to do something best—when someone said they couldn't. 'Where's my horse?'

'You can't ride.'

'Got to—'

'You mustn't talk, either. You stay right where you are. I'm going to make a travois.'

Again he tried to struggle to a sitting position, and then after a few more tries he knew it was hopeless and he nodded, angrily and in despair. He was suddenly sleepy. There was the taste of bile in his mouth. Nothing made much sense . . .

'All right, Mr. Randall—'

How did she know his name? And was it later now; some minutes later?

'All right, Mr. Randall. This may hurt, but you've got to make it on that travois. Come on!'

Then, crazy impressions—shining bits of color tumbling and falling in a moving curtain past his eyes. Things shimmering. The whole landscape, piñon-dotted hills and big, clean, empty sky whirling, as on a pinwheel, before him. In some of the moments everything was merely lifeless gray.

‘This may hurt.’

It hurt, all right, to get on that travois. It hurt enough to make a man let go of his mind. Did he scream? Somebody did. He liked to think it wasn’t himself. The shame of that, if he had screamed, would be worse than the pain—far worse.

And then before the blackness came, there was a last moment of clarity. He was on a blanket fixed to two slanted poles dragging behind the girl’s horse as she rode it slowly forward. She seemed to be headed north, because over on his right were the high, blunted saw-teeth of the Sangre de Cristos. The white puffs of afternoon clouds were forming over the mountains. The rest of the sky was clear. In the other direction, somewhere out on the flat plain, a yellow column of twirling dust raced over the land. Dust devils always formed in the afternoons on these hot, still days. He had seen them time and time again down in the dry country of his childhood. Epifanio, who knew all the superstitions, always said they were really *bruja*s—the souls of witches—whenever he saw one. Randall didn’t believe that, of course, and yet—yet he remembered that a dust devil had moved across the plain the day he first saw his daddy kill a man . . .

two

LIGE RANDALL had come to this part of New Mexico not much more than thirty days ago. He and Epifanio had drifted into Tesqua with two horses under them and behind them two pack-horses under all their worldly goods. These horses were all their livestock, and there had been so little left when the creditors got through with the Double Running R that they'd had to buy them before they could start out.

They walked their footsore beasts into the town and they were hot and dusty and they smelled of ammonia and sweat. They stabled the animals for some rest and decent feed.

'*Pues, cuate,*' said Epifanio. 'What now?'

Epifanio was built like a hanging pear. He had dark, fathomless eyes in a smooth-cheeked, olive face, and he always seemed to be looking about in his own private world, which surrounded him, but was invisible to anyone else.

Unlike most of the town-Mexicans Randall had seen down in Texas, Epifanio was indifferent to personal decoration and usually wore the kind of thing other people would have thrown away long ago—except for his boots. They were six-stitch San Antone boots, soft as kid gloves, and he worked calf-grease into them every night and then slept with them.

'Eat and sleep,' said Randall, in answer to Epifanio's question. 'Know anything better to do?'

Epifanio was impervious to both sarcasm and indirect-

tion in talk. He grunted, pointed to the hotel on the main street and said, 'Alla?'

Randall shook his head. 'Not there. Be fifty cents apiece, more'n likely.'

Epifanio grunted again.

'Some day,' said Randall, 'we'll buy that whole hotel and sleep in it just ourselves.'

'Si,' said Epifanio, not really listening.

'Someday,' said Randall, staring down the hot street, at the crudely lettered black-and-white sign in front of the yellow-painted frame house that was the hotel, 'we'll build one better than it just for the fun of doing it.'

'Si,' said Epifanio.

They took their slickers and bedrolls to a cottonwood grove just outside the town. Some Mexicans had their *jacales* along the stream, little shacks made of *terrones*, bricks spaded from the earth rather than molded and dried—they had been here first, and the Anglos who had built the town hadn't yet found a way to uproot them. A whole family came out of one *jacale* as they approached, and stood there in line, nine of them, from the thin, hollow-eyed father down to the latest ball of fat in the eldest girl's arms. Randall spoke to them in perfect Spanish. With his dark looks he could have been Mex himself, but they weren't so sure. Then Epifanio talked to them in his absent-minded way. After that they said: how not that you use the stream and sleep upon its banks? And they smiled and pointed the way. Epifanio could talk the Devil out of his tail.

In the morning Randall went to see about his new land. He had figured on a quick visit to the county courthouse to register his brand and make sure the description in the abstract matched that in his title deed, but he should have had sense enough to know that lawyers and county officials could never do anything quickly and

realistically. His deed was all in order, as any plain fool could see, but these office people at the courthouse were more than just plain fools: they were damn', fancy, top-grade fools. They said it would be more than a week before they knew whether or not his title was clear. He did most of his talking to a huge lout of a man with heavy brows that overhung his eyes like the forehead of a baboon. This man sat with his feet on the desk and, Randall was willing to bet, did nothing all day. He had two Mexican clerks in the office, who kept busy writing on papers and handling them. He resented Randall's appearing before him and upsetting his pleasant lethargy. The lettering on his office door said: *Israel Tell, County Clerk.*

'Now, Mr. Tell,' said Randall, being tightly patient, 'why does it take a week? This deed looks all in order to me.'

Tell kept staring off to one side as though hoping to find something that would give him an excuse to be suddenly busy so he could dismiss Randall. 'These things got to be looked into,' said Tell. 'Can't be too careful.'

'The deed's recorded here. All you have to do is find that.'

'That's what I say. We got to make a title search.'

'Shouldn't take a week.'

'Mr. Randall, we got our ways o' doin' things here. Best you leave it to us. We got to make a hundred percent sure your title's clear. Been some bad blood around here lately 'bout land claims. With the railroad comin' through soon, and all like that.'

'What railroad?' Randall's head came up.

Tell looked at him suspiciously from under those heavy brows. 'You ain't heard? You tryin' to make me believe you ain't heard about the railroad?'

‘ I asked you what railroad, didn’t I? Ought to be clear enough I don’t know about it.’

‘ If you didn’t know about the railroad, what would you be doin’ startin’ a spread in *this* country?’

‘ You don’t listen very close, do you, Mr. Tell?’ said Randall. ‘ I just got through explaining. My daddy won this deed in a poker game some time ago. It was put away and forgot, until just now, when the estate got sold off. It’s about all that’s left now.’

‘ We still got to be sure the land’s yours, legal.’

Randall tapped the deed on the desk. ‘ Take the trouble to look at it, Mr. Tell, and you’ll find it in order, signed over to me. It’s going to be the new Double Running R, Mr. Tell—and you better remember that brand, because you’re going to hear about it from now on.’

‘ That so?’ Tell looked at him with a new interest—and a new wariness.

Randall nodded and said, ‘ Now what’s this about the railroad?’

Tell gestured indifferently toward the map on the wall. ‘ They was goin’ to cross the mountains north o’ here—Spanish Pass. Now they changed their mind. They’re comin’ south on this side and circle round the mountains below, where it’s flat. That means anybody with cattle in these parts won’t have to drive ’em two hundred miles before he can ship ’em.’

‘ When’ll the tracks be through?’ •

‘ Next year some time. That’s what they’re figurin’ on.’

‘ Good! With a little luck I’ll have some cattle to ship by then.’

Tell shrugged. ‘ Might take more’n a little luck.’

‘ What do you mean?’

‘ It ain’t easy country for cattle. Leastwise, everybody

around here complains it ain't. Some o' the folks got a hard time holdin' on till the tracks come in.'

'I know what to do with cows, Mr. Tell. I think I'll be able to hold on.'

'Well, that's your business if you want to try it. But it ain't like Texas up here. Country's rough. Not much water. Weather gets pretty bad in the wintertime. Then there's other troubles.'

'What other troubles?'

Tell stared at him for the moment, finally licked his dry lips and said, 'I expect you'll be findin' soon enough if you're fool enough to start raisin' stock.'

Randall could get no more out of him.

While they waited for the title search, Randall and Epifanio made their first necessary purchases, dipping with care into their meager supply of cash. They bought some canned goods and a few months' supply of flour and sawdust-packed bacon. They had to go easy on coffee, which was expensive, and plan to ration it carefully. Meanwhile they got together the beginnings of a herd, by bargaining for and purchasing short yearlings wherever they could find them. They picked up these animals from scrub stock, accepting runts and waifs that nobody else wanted. They bought quietly in lots of two or three, or a dozen, penned the animals temporarily in the shipping corrals the owner of the livery stable was building in anticipation of the railroad, branded the animals there, and when they had as many as two dozen, they spent a day and a half driving them to the range Randall now owned.

A week later they were ready to leave the town, drive a final batch of thirty head to their land, and then settle there and begin building a shelter. It had been a busy week and an expensive one, but Randall felt that his luck was holding. He counted his cash, and that didn't take

much time, because there wasn't much to count. 'You know, it's a funny thing about luck,' he said to Epifanio. They were on the banks of the stream where they'd camped, resting briefly before the journey. 'You got to put out a little all the time to keep it coming in.'

'I don't know of what you are talking, *cuate*,' said Epifanio. He was smoking strong tobacco in a black shuck. Although he was Randall's hired hand and at times in the past had performed duties that might ordinarily fall to a servant, he had always regarded himself as something close to an uncle or elder brother in their relationship.

'Well, I mean this,' said Randall, rolling a cigarette to hang unlit in his mouth. 'We did pretty good with the little cash we had. Now we don't have much. Not enough to do any good. Seems to me the thing right now is to spend a little of it foolish. Prime the pump.'

'How you want to spend it foolish?'

'Let's walk up to town and have ourselves a drink before we get along.'

Epifanio shrugged, and that was so much to the good—Randall had expected him to put up an argument.

They walked together into the saloon called the 'Gran Quivira.' It was early morning, and the place wasn't crowded. The bartender was a sad-eyed man in a striped shirt without a collar; his jowls hung loosely, like a bloodhound's, and his whole manner said he wanted you to know right away he had his own troubles and was in no mood to listen to yours. Randall ordered whiskey.

'Fifty-three head, total,' he said, twirling the empty glass and staring into it. 'Not much, but it's a start.'

'Maybe we got a long time ahead, *cuate*,' said Epifanio.

'Maybe not so long. Next year, when the railroad

comes in, I expect to ship at least a hundred head. Maybe a bit more.'•

'You think they will have babies this fast for you?' Epifanio looked at him dryly.

Randall shook his head. 'We don't have to wait on nature. There's other ways of building the herd.'

Epifanio thought that over for a moment while he stared at Randall impassively with his dark, opaque eyes. 'You going to use a long rope, *cuate*?'

Randall poured another drink. 'Not exactly. But there's always unbranded stock running around loose. Specially in that open government land between our place and Colter's. All we have to do is brand it. Might keep us hopping, but then we knew we were in for some hard work when we left Texas.'

'Your father,' said Epifanio thoughtfully. 'That is how he began.'

'That's right. That's how he began.'

'Sometimes the neighbors, they didn't like it so much.'

'I remember that, too.'

'Sometimes there was trouble.'

Randall turned, looked at Epifanio, and grinned. 'Then maybe there'll be trouble again.'

'Si, maybe,' said Epifanio. He poured his own second drink. 'You are a Randall,' he said. 'You have the Randall blood.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Epifanio shrugged. 'The Randall way. Always alone. Don't ask for help. Don't give any help. Don't stop until you own it all.'

'I'd say that was about the size of it,' said Randall. 'See anything wrong in it?'

'I don't know,' said Epifanio, sighing. 'Maybe sometimes before I was thinking there is something wrong in

this. But I have been with the Randalls a long time. Maybe too long. Maybe now I am a Randall, too, and also think this way.'

'You worry too much.' Randall laughed. 'Come on, one more drink, then we move.'

A voice behind Randall said, 'Allow me to buy that drink for you, sir.'

Randall turned and found himself looking into a pair of blue eyes fastened hard upon him. For some reason he was startled by them. They were, he knew immediately and instinctively, the eyes of a man who believed in little and who was duped by less. They were the eyes of a man who could think coolly and clearly and cleverly. He felt that this man would not buy a drink for a stranger, or for a friend, for that matter, without good reason.

He showed none of what he knew or felt. He said, 'Thanks. I'll have a drink with you.'

The other ordered with a gesture, and the sad-eyed bartender sprang into action, pouring from the bottle already on the bar. The stranger nodded absent-mindedly, acknowledging this service in the way of one who quite expects it. He raised his own drink to Randall and Epifanio, smiling at them, and making his smile seem heart-felt—almost convincing Randall that it was, in spite of Randall's first quick instincts about the man.

'My name, sir,' said the man, when all had drunk, 'is Hammond Grew.'

He paused as though he expected a reaction to that. Randall looked blank.

The man paused for another moment while he absorbed what to him was almost incredible, but now evident enough—Randall had never heard of him. He cleared his throat. 'I thought perhaps you'd seen my office in town. I'm in the real estate business, Mr. Randall.'

‘I see,’ said Randall. ‘Hadn’t noticed your office, though. Not needing any real estate, I guess I didn’t look.’

Hammond Grew laughed at that. He had a hearty, deep-voiced laugh, and Randall had the strange feeling he must have practised it before a mirror, perfecting its charm. He saw, now that he had looked at Grew for some moments, that the man was hollow-cheeked and thin almost to the point of being scrawny. It was funny, but in the first few seconds he had felt Grew was distinguished looking—close to handsome. Now he saw that it was the man’s suave manner that gave this impression. He was dressed in eastern-style, in a pearl-gray suit, and even Randall, who knew little of fabrics or tailoring, sensed that this was an expensive get-up. But it was quietly expensive; it did not call attention to itself right away.

‘So you don’t need real estate, Mr. Randall,’ said Grew. ‘That’s a clever way of putting it. I can see I’ve got a shrewd man here to deal with.’

‘Deal with? What kind of deal have you got in mind, Mr. Grew?’

Grew smiled sardonically for a moment, frankly searching Randall’s expression with his intelligent blue eyes. ‘Wouldn’t it be better for us to talk frankly, right from the beginning, Mr. Randall?’

‘I never talk any other way,’ said Randall.

Grew cocked his head to one side and narrowed his eyes somewhat. ‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘it’s just possible that you are telling the absolute truth. A rare thing in this world—but possible.’

‘Mr. Grew,’ said Randall, ‘would you take it hard, if I said I still don’t know what in hell you’re talking about?’

‘Have another drink, sir,’ said Grew. ‘I believe you

are telling the truth. I believe, indeed, you never heard of me and haven't the faintest idea why I've accosted you here.'

'Took you some time to get to them simple facts,' said Randall.

Grew motioned for drinks again and, suddenly seized with a fit of violent coughing, grabbed the edge of the bar to steady himself. When it was over, he patted his lips with a large linen handkerchief. 'You'll forgive me, sir.' His eyes were watery from the paroxysm. 'It's a touch of consumption I'm cursed with. The doctors in New York gave me a month to live and I've managed to make liars of them twenty-four times over. I'll probably last forever in this high, dry air of yours. The fact is, I'm much too wicked to die.'

Randall glanced at Epifanio. Epifanio was looking at Grew so impassively that his eyes were like polished basalt. Randall, who knew Epifanio, understood that he did not like the man. Randall himself had not quite formed an irrevocable opinion yet.

'I'm also going to make liars of my friends who assured me I would stagnate out here,' said Grew, recovered by now, his eyes clear once more. 'I'm going to make my second fortune one of these days—and right out here, in this country, Mr. Randall. But of course this doesn't particularly interest you—except to indicate that I prefer to speak frankly and pretend to no motives other than the very fundamental one of self-interest. Now, then, I believe we understand each other?'

'Takes some digging,' said Randall, 'but I think I see what you're saying under all the long words.'

Mr. Grew thought this was witty, too, and laughed at some length. He downed the second drink. 'Candidly, Mr. Randall,' he said finally, 'it has come to my attention that you are the owner of a stretch of property south



of the government land and John Colter's Bar Broken C. It is such an unlikely piece of property—if you'll forgive my saying so—that my first reaction was that you'd come to Tesqua merely to sell it, at whatever price it would fetch. In fact, I was surprised that you did not seek me out first—I sat and waited for you for some days.'

'Mr. Grew,' said Randall, 'I'm not here to sell this property—the Double Running R. I'm here to build it up into the biggest outfit in these parts one day.'

'Oh?' Grew nodded. 'A worthy ambition. But let us ask ourselves: is it a realistic one? I understand you've purchased a small herd of scrub animals. How do you intend to build that into something large and profitable?'

Randall smiled. 'Mr. Grew, I don't ask how you're going to make this second fortune of yours, because I don't reckon I'd understand you proper even if you did explain. Now, it's the same with my business—the cattle business. You'll just have to take my word for it that I know what to do.'

'I see.' Grew thought for a moment, then abruptly said, 'Randall, I'll give you five thousand dollars for the Double Running R, as she stands now.'

Randall looked at him. 'Why would you want to buy it?'

'As an investment. I doubt that anyone will ever successfully raise cattle on it—not without a great deal of working capital at the beginning. But it is in this general area, and it is my purpose to own all the land I possibly can in this area. The reason for that is no secret—the railroad is coming through.'

'So I'd heard.'

'This may lead you to believe, Mr. Randall, that your property is thus more valuable to you. But let me point out the flaw in such reasoning. I have certain resources: I can hold out long enough to sell at a profit one day.'

From what I judge of the circumstances, I don't believe you can, Mr. Randall."

'That land's about all I got right now, and I'm hanging on to it.'

'Six thousand.'

'Not any amount of money, Mr. Grew.'

'Seven-five—and that's positively my last offer, sir.'

'Good. I was getting kind of tired of hearing them. Now, if you'll have a drink with us, Mr. Grew, we'll be getting along.'

Grew declined the drink. He withdrew, keeping his dignity. Randall smiled and stalked out of the saloon, Epifanio silent a few paces behind him. He waved jauntily to Grew before he passed through the door and struck the white wall of sunlight outside.

That was how Lige Randall had come to Tesqua and his new home. He had paid not undue attention to Israel Tell's darkly muttered hints about difficulties beyond the usual lashes of nature; he had decided that Grew's quick offer to buy his spread was, as much as anything, eccentric.

They drove the last of their scrub cattle to their range, and in a likely spot by a dry stream and some cottonwoods they built a lean-to for immediate shelter. They dug for a day in the stream-bed and finally found water, though not much of it. Epifanio began to make adobes, using dry grass to bind the mud. He set them out in the sun to bake.

They explored their acres and sections, and before long Randall set out to ride the perimeter of their land. That was when he went after a fat, unbranded steer for meat; that was when a hidden marksman, for no sane reason, shot the steer as he was chousing it down, and that was when Randall's horse threw him and he fell, regaining consciousness only long enough to know that a

pretty young woman with long blonde hair had picked him up and put him into a travois to take him somewhere.

For a long time after that there was blackness and delirium.

three

HE WAS in a bed—a real bed. At first he thought for sure it was his old bed, in the big ranch house, down in Texas. That had been his mother's bed before she died—or so his daddy had always told him. It had been shipped in special from New Orleans when his folks were first married. It had four long posts and a cloth canopy on top, and there were curtains that could be fastened to shut everything out. He gave up using the curtains when he was eleven or twelve, but before that he couldn't sleep without them.

He used to pretend that his bed was a great rolling expanse of ranch and that he was king of it, like Daddy was of all *his* acres. He had a main house and barns and corrals and a bunk-house and a smoke-house and a spring-house on his bed, and there were little Mexican settlements on the edge here and there, and there was a regular town down at the foot, which wasn't exactly his property, but he was king of the town, too—everybody understood that.

'Daddy? You here, Daddy?'

In the core of his mind he knew that daddy wasn't really here, but this couldn't stop the rest of him, steeped in fever, from calling out.

'Daddy?'

'Easy, son. Just take it easy.'

That was a man's voice, but it wasn't Daddy Randall's.

'How is he, Doc?' said the same voice.

'He is a sick boy.' The doctor's voice had a thick

accent, and under the accent a strange, alien sadness. 'First, a skull fracture. Second, perhaps the broken rib pierced the lung. I wish I could know.'

'You're the doc. You ought to know.'

'So little are we sure of, Mr. Colter. So little. If you want to know more, you better ask God.'

Then there was a new voice—a woman's voice—but not that of the girl who had made the travois. This woman sounded older. 'Doctor Levi,' she said, 'I wish you wouldn't take the name of the Lord in vain!'

Randall heard a deep sigh. 'Not in vain, my dear lady. Not in vain. Only with deepest respect. Believe me—only a doctor can know.'

Mr. Colter, the deep-voiced man, said, 'Better come on downstairs, Doc. We'll have a little something to get you on the road back to town.'

'John Colter!' said the woman. 'It's workin' hours and you know it! Every time you find an excuse to have a drink with someone—'

'Now, Maria! This ain't a drink. This here's medicinal. Ask the doc.'

'It is true, Madam,' said Dr. Levi. 'In moderate quantities the alcohol strengthens the humors and promotes the flow of bile.'

'I don't believe it!' said Mrs. Colter. 'But anyways, go and have your drink, you two. I'll stay with this poor boy a spell.'

These voices came to Randall in one of the clearer passages.

For the most part there were periods of strange, filmy red and periods of deepest black. Once he managed to open his eyes fully and bright yellow sunlight struck them like an explosion. He closed them again. He dreamed of the bed back at the old Double Running R and of his father and himself, on horseback, galloping

side by side into the wind, over land that was clear and open as far as you could see . . .

‘Can you hear me, Mr. Randall?’

That was the voice of the girl who had made the travois. He had tried, in his mind, to recall her voice, to generate it within his skull, and had been unsuccessful in that and had thought that perhaps he had forgotten her voice, but now he knew that he knew it; he knew he would never forget it.

He tried to concentrate upon listening to her voice, but his thoughts insisted upon wandering. He heard her voice and thought that it was clear as spring water, and then he thought of the springhouse on the big ranch down in Texas, the great tract of rolling, open land that belonged to a bunch of other people now, though he expected they still called it the Randall place, and probably always would, and then he thought of his own place, the new Randall place, and he began to remember that he’d told Epifanio he’d be back in the evening—

‘Got to get back,’ he said. His voice echoed, as in a deep, rocky canyon.

‘You rest now,’ said the girl. ‘Everything’s going to be all right. Rest, and eat this soup.’

And then, one morning, when the sun had just come up and was streaming through a set of drawn chintz curtains, he awoke fully.

She was standing over the bed with a tray of breakfast.

‘Well, cowboy, how do you feel?’

She was smiling, and he’d been right about those quick, gypsy eyes of hers—there *was* a touch of mischief in them. He stared at her blankly for a moment, then, not quite able to be entirely civil even though he wanted to, he scowled and said, ‘I’ll feel better when I can get out of here.’

He looked down and saw that his left arm was held

tight against his body with bandages. There was plaster all over his chest and around his back. He touched his head with his free hand and felt bandages there.

The girl was laughing.

'Cowboy, you'd better relax. The doctor says you've a long way to go. Three or four weeks—maybe more.'

He wanted to swear, but he did not. 'How long I been here?'

'Nearly ten days.'

He did swear then.

The girl looked at him with mock severity and clucked her tongue.

He grunted. That was as near as he'd come to saying he was sorry to a woman.

'For a while there,' said the girl, 'we thought you weren't going to make it. It was a rough trip here to the house.'

'I reckon I owe you some thanks for getting me here.'

'Don't think about it. There wasn't anyplace else to take you. Anyway, you're evidently pretty hard to destroy, Mr. Randall. What is your first name—Elijah, isn't it?'

'Lige.'

'All right, Lige. Try some breakfast.'

Breakfast was eggs, a stack of wheats, and coffee. He tried the coffee first. When he had sipped he said, 'You know *my* name. That puts you ahead',

'We know all our neighbors' names,' she said, 'even if they don't visit.' She was smiling, but in her words there was the overtone of a rebuke. 'I'm Pat Colter, my father's John Colter, and this is the Bar Broken C.'

Randall nodded. 'Heard tell of you. There's a strip of your land licks around and touches mine. Maybe I better get that boundary surveyed one of these days.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' said Pat Colter. 'We

don't fuss over boundaries in these parts. Do you feel well enough to talk to Daddy?"

'What's he like to talk to?'

'Easy, usually. But like a howling bear when he's crossed.'

Randall shrugged. 'Right now I can talk to a bear—though I'd hate to have a rattle with one, the way I feel.'

She laughed and took up the coffee cup he'd emptied. He noticed for the first time that she wore a cotton dress with bright flowers on it, and she looked more female than she had in pants and with that silly straw hat hanging over her shoulder blades. She saw him staring at her dress, and lowered her eyes and ran her hands over it, smoothing it. 'It's Sunday,' she said.

'It's what?' said Randall.

'Sunday. I always try to dress nicely on Sunday. We don't get many other excuses for dressing nicely out here.'

'Sunday's the same as any other day to me,' said Randall.

'Perhaps it is.' She looked out of the window. 'Perhaps in this country it is.' Then suddenly she turned back to him again and shook her head as though shaking away something bothersome. 'More coffee, Mr. Randall?'

'Yes, ma'am. I could use it.'

'Anything else you want?'

'If your daddy's got some makin's around—'

'Of course. I should have thought you'd want to smoke.'

"I don't smoke. I just roll 'em and stick 'em in my mouth.'

'That's a funny habit.'

'I expect I got more than one funny habit, Miss Colter.'

'I think we can get used to them.'

‘You won’t have to try,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I won’t be around that long.’

She frowned at him before she left the room.

When she was gone, the door shut behind her; he stared in her wake for a moment; then shrugged again. The wheat cakes looked tasty, and he tackled them. The sun continued to stream into the room, and as it moved, the shadows shortened themselves. It was quiet outside.

After a while the door opened again, and a tall man with graying handle-bar mustaches came in. He had a cowboy’s easy build, his trousers belted low on practically non-existent hips, and he moved more slowly than Pat Colter, and his eyes were set for horizons, but otherwise the family resemblance was there.

‘Mornin’, Randall. Pat says you’re feelin’ better.’

‘You’re Mr. Colter.’

‘That’s right. Brought you some makin’s. Pat said you didn’t want to smoke—just roll.’

‘Gives my hands a place to go. Thank you.’

Colter tossed him a sack of tobacco with its folder of wheatstraw tucked into the label. Almost without thinking Randall glanced at the label to see if the tobacco was GOLD DUST—the kind whose purse-string tab he’d found near where someone had squeezed off three rifle shots in his direction. But it was one of the usual brands.

Randall began to roll one-handed and found that his fingers had lost some of their skill. He might have known that. They always got clumsy if he let so much as a day go by without practising. Colter stood quietly a few feet from the bed and watched. Randall let him watch.

When the cigarette was finished, and in the corner of Randall’s mouth, Colter smoothed down his mustache with his thumb and said, ‘Feelin’ well enough to hear a complaint?’

‘What kind o’ complaint?’

‘Nothin’ very big. I expect you didn’t know that steer was mine.’

‘How’s this, now?’

‘The four-year-old you was chousin’ down when Pat saw you. And the one that was shot in front o’ you.’

‘Your steers, you say?’

‘Both my strays. They keep wanderin’ into that stretch o’ gov’ment land, and we don’t get ’em all out every year. I’m goin’ to put in a line camp one o’ these days and take care o’ that.’

Randall frowned. ‘I don’t see as I follow this, Mr. Colter. You make a spring and fall round-up, don’t you? Don’t that put a brand on most of your stock?’

‘Well—we been runnin’ short-handed.’ Colter moved over to the bedside table and hooked his long, loose-jointed leg over the corner of it, half-sitting. ‘Only way to make it pay out here. We’re too far from the railroad, and we got to make a pretty long drive to sell the beef. Takes a lot off the cows, and we don’t get much of a price. Only way we can save is by not hirin’ too many hands. Then, come roundup, all the neighbors pitch in and help each other. But I expect you’ll find that out when the time comes.’

‘I can handle what I got without help,’ said Randall.

‘Sure, I reckon you can. With what you got now. But when you build up your herd you’ll be needin’ some help. I expect you mean to build it up?’

‘I mean to do that. Yes.’

‘And that kind o’ brings us to another point. I understand you picked up a few calves on that gov-ment land.’

‘I found some stock with no brand on it.’

‘Well, what you already got, you’re welcome to, Randall. No sense in us gettin’ off on the wrong foot right at

the start. But I hope you'll stop cuttin' in from now on.'

Randall stared at the old man evenly. 'I haven't fitted my rope on anything branded yet, Mr. Colter.'

Colter took a curved pipe from his shirt pocket, a leather sack out of his trouser pocket, and started to fill the pipe with tobacco as black as charred hide. 'Sure,' he said. 'I know that. But a great deal o' my stock on that gov'ment range just never did get branded. Had all we could do just to make a few steers out o' the bull calves.'

'Never met a cattleman who didn't brand,' said Randall.

'Well, now,' said Colter, 'if a feller was to be all stiff and legal about it, that stock belongs to anybody who finds it. But we don't operate that way around here.'

'How do you operate, Mr. Colter?'

'Why—we just try to be neighborly.' Colter lit his pipe and made a thick cloud of smoke. Then he gazed into it as it drifted away, as though he could see the future there. 'Randall, there's goin' to be more towns in this country some day. Not just a couple o' 'dobe shacks at the foot of a hill, like 'Teskua, but real towns. The railroad comin' through next year is just the beginnin'.'

'Wouldn't doubt it,' said Randall, his tone cautious.

'Towns,' said Colter. 'Civilisation. Like back in Mis-soura, where I come from, young. I've always had a hankerin' to have a real suit and a gold-headed cane and go walkin' down the street of a real town when I get too old to ride.'

'Well, now,' said Randall.

Colter didn't seem to hear. 'There was a old buck in our town, when I was a boy, used to walk down the street with a gold-headed cane. We called him Squire. He wasn't squire of nothin' in particular, and to tell the warranted truth, he wasn't of much use to nobody—but

everybody showed him respect. Don't know why, exactly—exceptin' he had land and money.' "

'That's why, then,' said Randall.

Colter blinked suddenly, then cleared his throat. 'Anyways,' he said, 'we all of us aim to make somethin' out o' this country. That's why we put such stock in helpin' each other out.'

'Well, Mr. Colter,' said Randall, 'that's all very nice. But as for me, when I run an outfit, I take care to brand what's mine—and do it quick.'

Colter stared at him for a few seconds. 'I see,' he said.

'I thank you for haulin' me here,' said Randall, 'and when I can, I'll pay you what it costs.'

'We don't want no pay,' said Colter, 'not for helpin' you out.'

'No profit in that, Mr. Colter.'

'There's profit in it. The way we figure, there is.'

'And how do you figure?'

'We figure we need each other's help, all of us in these parts. And for more than just lending a hand when it comes time to round up cattle.'

'Like what?'

'Like the trouble we all been havin' lately. It'll touch you, too, before long.'

'I'd be obliged if you speak plain, Mr. Colter. That clerk down at the courthouse—Tell—he was trying to say there was some kind of trouble. But he wouldn't say *what* kind.'

Colter puffed deeply. 'We been missin' cattle, Randall. Branded cattle. Every now and then a few head. Here and there. They been run off—the sign's plain enough.'

'Generally a little rustling going on, most places.'

'Maybe you could call 'em that. But it ain't regular common rustlin'.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘No rustler out to make some money for hisself is goin’ to run off cattle, five, ten head at a time. And it ain’t just runnin’ ’em off. There’s been poisoned water holes, shots to scare the riders, stampedes to take the fat off a herd.’

‘Or shooting a steer while you’re chousing it down?’ said Randall thoughtfully.

Colter nodded. ‘Pat told us what happened to you. They ain’t tried that one before, but I’ve no doubt it was part of the way they been bedevillin’ everybody. They probably figured you was one o’ my hands.’

‘And who do you mean by “they”?’

‘We don’t know, exactly. There’s been some talk it might be Hammond Grew’s crowd. He’s a eastern feller come to these parts, and—’

‘I met him,’ said Randall.

‘Well, nothin’ can be proved, mind you. But this Grew’s tryin’ to buy up everybody’s land. Get a offer from him, steady, once a week, I do. He try to buy yours?’

‘He did.’

Colter’s pipe had gone out, and he sucked on it noisily. He gave in finally, sighed, and took the pipe from his mouth for a moment. ‘Some folks have sold to him. Not whole spreads, but parcels. Needed the money. It ain’t easy to make do in these parts without money to carry you. That’s why we’re all helpin’ each other. That’s why we’re glad to see you come along, Randall. Another hand is always a help.’

Randall frowned. ‘I wouldn’t count on me for too much.’

‘Well, we understand you ain’t set up permanent yet—’

‘I didn’t mean that, Mr. Colter. I meant I like to go my own way.’

Colter lit his pipe again. 'You—like to go your own way.' He said it thoughtfully, almost making a question of it.

'That's how my daddy went. That's the way I go. I don't ask for help, and don't put out any. Keeps everything nice and straight, that way.'

Colter looked at him gravely. 'I see.'

'I thank you for hauling me here,' said Randall, 'and when I can I'll pay you what it costs.'

'We don't want no pay, boy. I told you that before.'

'I'm paying when I can. Meanwhile, I'm getting back to my spread soon as possible and get to work. I got a long, hard winter ahead, Mr. Colter.'

Colter nodded thoughtfully, and then, before he turned abruptly and walked out, he said, 'I reckon you do.'

four

RANDALL LIPPED his unlit cigarette and sat there, propped to the pillow, thinking about things. The Colters were soft. In the days to come, when he was expanding, they'd be no problem to him. Just the same he didn't aim to get all tangled up in friendship with them—or with anybody—because his daddy had left him the Randall blood, and Randalls went it alone. That was how they got where they were going.

Old Rufus Randall had started with nothing but his two hands, a length of five-eighths hard-twist manila, a Colt, and a few cartridges. His first herd was made up of mavericks he'd pulled off the open range. Others in Texas had tried the same and failed in those days, but Rufe Randall had got away with it because he stuck up, hard, for his own rights—and it was he alone who decided what his rights were, and kept to himself all the way.

Lige Randall would never forget the day his daddy stood off a pack of others. It was branded on his memory.

That day the sun was so hot it was ready to strike you down if you stopped moving under it, and the shadows of the fence posts lay across the yellow land like dead men. There was a dust devil far out from the ranchhouse that day, scooting over the dry prairie like a slinking thing that had already done some evil work and was trying to get away.

And there was a delegation of neighboring ranchers, a full six of them, mounted, and looking down at daddy and him. He was twelve that year.

They were all armed, these callers, though daddy said later the weapons were just for show—they had really not hoped to make trouble. Fact was, they wanted to avoid it. That was where they failed, said daddy, in not being willing and ready to fight. He knew it just from looking at them and sizing them up, he said.

The ranchers claimed to recognize some of Rufus Randall's newly branded stock, and they allowed it was theirs and had strayed, and they said they'd come to take it. The man who did the talking was a thickset, powerful, Dutchy-looking rancher, with green eyeholes augered into the fat of his face.

'You got a long rope, Randall,' he said. 'We asked you to shorten it many a time. Now we come to get our stock.'

'Do tell,' said daddy. Rufus Randall was built like a buffalo, with a thick chest tapering down to pointed, agile legs. He stood like a buffalo at bay, too—except that he didn't look quite as undecided.

'We're bein' polite enough,' said the Dutchman, 'to ask you to come along, whilst we round up everything and cut out our own.'

The dust devil, Randall remembered, had disappeared over the horizon by this time.

They all looked at daddy and then at each other. They were six, and daddy was one—one and a half if you counted the unarmed twelve-year-old boy off to one side.

'Step on this land,' said daddy, 'and you'll be shot for trespassin'.'

They figured it for brave and empty talk.

The Dutchman came forward, and the other stirred. Daddy didn't have to signal young Lige or give him any kind of warning, because he'd gone over hypothetical situations like his with the boy many times and had taught him what to do. Young Randall didn't even wait

for his father to draw. He knew he was about to draw. He knew the old man meant business, even if the others didn't. The moment the Dutchman stepped across the boundary line twelve-year-old Lige threw himself to the ground and rolled behind a fence post.

He heard two shots. One was from the carbine the Dutchman held; the other was from his daddy's Colt. The Dutchman dropped. The others didn't come any further, but sat there, horsed and frozen, until daddy moved his pistol at them like a snake's head and told them to pick up the dead man and take him away . . .

In a few days Lige Randall was hobbling about in the Colter house. Evidently John Colter had told the rest of them about their talk, for they tended to be coldly polite to him and sometimes seemed embarrassed when he came upon the scene. At least, that was how Colter, his daughter, and his foreman, Orrin Kigley, reacted. Only Maria Colter—Ma, as the others always called her—didn't seem to care who Randall was or how he felt, and she, as he soon found out, had her own reasons for getting on the sweet side of him.

The climax of Ma Colter's day was the evening meal, and she expected you to say something nice about each dish she brought in. That wasn't hard to do. Dinner was always on a huge table downstairs, one of those that could be enlarged by putting extra boards in the middle, and when Colter's hands were around, they usually ate here in the main house, if there weren't too many. Colter figured them all as part of the family. Right now most of the hands were out on summer beef roundup or on other chores, such as hauling salt, repairing windmills, and keeping the watering places in shape. When they would come in to report, Randall would listen to their range-talk, and then he himself would itch to get away.

He sat eating moodily one evening, keeping to himself at the end of the table, when Ma Colter said to him, 'What is your persuasion, Mr. Randall?'

'Ma'am?'

'What is your religious persuasion, Mr. Randall?'

It took him by surprise. 'Why, I don't rightly know, ma'am.'

He noticed that at this point John Colter looked up, frowned for a moment, then went on eating. There were only the three of them at this meal; Pat, the daughter, was visiting some folks in town. Lige didn't miss her too much, for when she had been there, she hadn't spoken to him very often, though he had caught her glancing at him curiously—as though she couldn't quite figure him out, but wanted to—several times. He told himself he wasn't much interested in her anyway, mainly because he didn't have the time right now for any woman, but the fact was, almost unwillingly, he sometimes looked up and tried to study her when he thought she wouldn't notice.

Ma Colter looked at him and said, 'But surely you know what church you go to?'

'I can't say as I do,' said Randall.

'Do you mean to sit there and tell me, Mr. Randall, you've never been to church.'

'Oh, I've been, all right. Daddy took me once.'

'Once? Just once?'

'Yes, ma'am. My daddy was a widower—I believe I mentioned that.'

'Yes. So I understand.'

'Well, he was interested in some gal at the time, and she was going to this church. I reckon he went just to show her he could stand it. Daddy could stand 'most anything if he set his mind to it.'

'Mr. Randall, church is not an ordeal that a body has to stand!'

‘ Well, it didn’t matter anyway,’ said Randall. ‘ Daddy decided against this gal, so we didn’t go again.’

Ma Colter stared at Randall with her mouth open. She had a roundish face and very clear blue eyes. She always looked fresh-scrubbed, even when her stove was going full blast on the hottest day and she was fussing over it. ‘ Young man,’ she said, ‘ do you mean to sit there and tell me you’ve never had religious instruction of any kind?’

‘ Oh, I went to school in town for a spell. They used to read the Bible some there.’

She turned to her husband. ‘ You see, John? It’s just what I keep saying. This country *needs* a church.’

‘ Well . . . I ain’t agin it.’ Colter looked uncomfortable.

‘ You ain’t enough *for* it, either,’ said Ma. ‘ You just sit there and agree with me every time, but you do mighty little about it.’

Colter sighed. ‘ Now, Maria, we’re goin’ to have a church soon’s we get a roof on it. But it seems to me we got to have a town first. If you could just wait till after the railroad was through—’

‘ And when the railroad’s through, it’ll be some other excuse,’ said Ma ‘ Don’t you menfolk go tryin’ to put us off now. We already sent for the Reverend Hurley, and he’s goin’ to be here any day. And *you’re* goin’ to church with us when he gets here!’

‘ I didn’t say I wouldn’t,’ said Colter wearily.

She turned to Randall again. ‘ Mr. Hurley preaches a fine sermon. Such a fine voice. You can hear him so clear, way to the back o’ the church. And just a young man, too. I heard him when I was east a year ago, visitin’ our kinfolk. That was when Pat finished school and I went east to get her. Well, as it turns out, Mr. Hurley’s willing to come out here and take his chances if we get the church built for him.’

'The fact is, Randall,' drawled John Colter, wiping some gravy from his big mustache, 'young Tod Hurley's sweet on our Pat. That's why he's so all-fired willin' to come out and live with the jack rabbits.'

'John Colter, you know that's not true!'

'It's *close* enough to be true,' said Colter.

Ma Colter ignored her husband. 'We'd admire for you to be one of our congregation, Mr. Randall, soon's we get a roof and Mr. Hurley arrives.'

'Well, ma'am,' said Randall, 'I expect I'll be a mite busy—'

'Now, Mr. Randall, nobody's so busy he can't take a day o' rest once in a while. Besides, we're goin' to need just everybody if we're goin' to have a church. It takes money to keep one goin', you know.'

'There you go, Ma,' said Colter, scowling. 'Passin' the collection plate again. Randall, wouldn't you have some more potatoes?'

'Thank you,' said Randall. 'They're mighty fine cooked this way. How on earth do you do it, ma'am?'

For once Randall and Colter exchanged the glances of men who share the same purpose. Turning the talk to cooking was the only way to get Ma off the subject of the new church, and both knew it. This rapport, however, lasted only briefly, and before the meal was over they were being overly polite to each other again.

Randall's body healed more each day. Dr. Levi visited about every three days, and each time he came, Randall peckered him about getting away. Levi was a tiny man who wore dark, formal clothes, even for the long ride from Tesqua to the Colter place, and sported a huge, billowing linen duster, three sizes too large for him, over his black suit when he took to horseback. He always showed a grave manner when he began talking to you, but he became excited very easily.

‘Randall, again I’m telling you,’ he would say, his agitation mounting; ‘you get on a horse and walk it even, from here to there only, a distance of practically nothing—you could spring that broken rib! Into your lung, and you could bleed to death! You’d like to bleed to death?’

‘But when can I get out?’

‘You want to get out of here late and alive—or early and dead?’

‘Look, Doc—’

‘Yes?’

‘Why is it every time I ask you a question, you answer with another question?’

Dr. Levi thought that over for a moment, then spread his hand, shrugged, and said, ‘Why shouldn’t I?’

Randall had to laugh, and Doctor Levi laughed with him. It was strange, but of all of them, Randall enjoyed Doctor Levi the most, during his short visits. They had little in common, much less than he and Colter, for instance, yet Randall felt almost from the beginning that there was a curious accord between them. He tried to figure out just what it was, and the nearest he could come to it was this: they were both independent men—lonely men, you could say—and neither was fooled by the pretensions of other men. He sensed this without exactly putting it into so many words. He felt that Doctor Levi must have a certain hardness similar to his own—a shell that others had made it necessary to wear. With this impression already formed he was surprised, one day, to learn of Levi’s spiritual leanings.

He had been talking about Ma Colter’s efforts to get him to join the church and making a little fun of the obviousness of her attempt.

Levi, who had been checking his rib cage under his bandages, was re-wrapping him. ‘Maybe it would be a

good thing, you go to church,' he said. 'Let me ask would it hurt you?'

'Doc, you must be a pretty busy man. Do you have time to go to church?'

'Randall,' said the doctor, 'out here I don't have my own church to go to. But this I tell you. I am not too busy that every morning I can't say my prayers. Not for myself, Randall—unless to ask Got to let me know a little bit more. For you, and for all the other sick people. Do you think I can cure them alone? Do you think you should be alive after what happened to you right now?'

'All right. Tell me honest now, Doc—what do you care whether I; or the other sick people, are alive or not?'

Doctor Levi shrugged deeply, said, 'Why shouldn't they be?' and Randall could get no more out of him.

The days dragged by. Randall waited and forced himself to be patient, figuring that waiting was part of the fight he was in. Colter had some time ago sent a rider south to tell Epifanio what had happened, and Randall knew the old Mexican would keep things going until ht showed up again.

He began to insist on doing a few roustabout chores around the house. He said this was to keep himself busy, but actually it nettled his pride to be obligated to the Colters, and he wanted to work off as much of the obligation as possible. He chopped wood, fetched water, repaired the corral fence in a place or two, and once or twice even disgraced himself to the extent of milking a cow—the last thing most self-respecting cowboys would consent to do.

He was still weak, and he was usually tuckered out at the end of each day. He'd retire right after supper, mostly, and in a week or so he had managed to read not only every dime novel in the house, but the mail order catalog and the words on the peach and tomato labels.

One evening after supper he wandered out to the porch and sprawled on the hammock there. He rolled a cigarette and let it hang from his lip. John Colter was at his roll-top desk in the parlor, scowling at books and bills under the pale light of a Rochester lamp; the moon and stars were out in force, and there was only the faintest wind through the blue chamiso out on the prairie and the red willows along the tiny stream that ran near the house.

Pat Colter came out on the porch, took a few steps, and stopped short when she saw Randall there.

He regarded her mildly. The hammock swung gently, and he kept his eyes half-closed and the unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth. 'Got your place, Miss Colter?'

'No.'

'I expect I have. Well—I'm ready to leave it.'

'Don't go on my account.'

He started to swing his feet over the side. 'Wouldn't want to be more of a bother than I already am.'

'If you didn't think it was a bother, it wouldn't be.'

'How's that, now?'

She came toward him and leaned against the porch rail. 'Would you answer a personal question for me, Mr. Randall?'

He was aware of the difference between their voices: hers poised and sure of itself, like the riding of a man who doesn't have to think about staying close to the saddle, and his own, in her presence, stiff and uncertain. He said, 'Depends on how personal.'

'Where did you get the idea of doing everything for yourself?' she asked. 'What made you think no one can ever help you?'

He thought that over for a while. He moved the cigarette, with his lips, from one corner of his mouth to the other. Finally he said. 'It wasn't my idea, Miss Colter.'

'It seems to me it's the idea to which you subscribe.'

'Well, I'll tell you, Miss Colter. You've got to go alone. That is, if you really figure on going anywhere.'

'Oh? And where are you going?'

'There's no secret there I figure on being the biggest cattleman in this part of New Mexico some day.'

'Why?'

He didn't know whether to laugh or to take her seriously and try to find an answer to the question. Finally he said, 'Well, why not? Doesn't everybody figure on being something big?'

'I don't think so.'

'How about your own daddy.'

'He'd like to own a gold headed cane and be called "Squire." But he's not going to make any enemies in order to do it.'

'And what do you want to do yourself, Miss Colter?'

She hadn't expected that question. She turned her head quickly to look out into the night. The cottonwoods, lining the stream, were pale green and silver in the moonlight. When she finally spoke, her voice became tight and quiet. 'I want to leave this country,' she said.

'Looks to me almost as if you're admiring it.'

'I am. It's a beautiful country. It could be a paradise. But right now it's a savage place, and I'm sick of it.'

'Savage? Why, there hasn't been any Indian trouble for some time.'

'I don't mean that.' She shook her head. 'I mean—well, I mean this is a man's country. This is where a man doesn't have to grow up. He can settle his quarrels by manhandling someone or shooting him. The men here want women—as they do anyplace—but they want them for slaves or servants. Or, perhaps, in some cases, brood mares.'

Randall laughed. 'Putting it kind of strong, ain't you, Miss Colter?'

She didn't seem to hear him. 'They don't want the decent things and the beautiful things women want. They want to keep this country wild and full of death.'

'I guess you like it better back east, where you went to school.'

'I think it's obvious I do.'

He smiled. 'Even with the Reverend Mr. Hurley heading out this way?'

'Tod Hurley has nothing to do with it!'

Randall laughed.

'And I'll not have you making fun of Tod Hurley when he gets here!' she said.

He lifted his eyebrows. 'Why should I, Miss Colter?'

'Because he's a gentleman. I'm sure you'd make fun of anyone who was a gentleman.'

'You think I would?'

'I know you would.'

He studied her for a while, still smiling, but he was feeling defensive. Finally he said, 'You don't think much of me, do you, Miss Colter?'

'I don't think about you one way or the other, Mr. Randall.'

'Well,' he said, 'it don't make much difference to me, either. That's another thing my daddy taught me. When you're going some place a lot of people are just plumb bound to be jealous. You start caring about whether they like you or not—first thing you know, you're soft. Then they get you.'

Pat Colter stared at him. She seemed to have caught his eyes so that he couldn't swing them away. 'What about love, Mr. Randall?'

'Well, what about it?'

'How can you get anything out of life with a lot of

people hating you? Haven't you ever wanted anyone to love you instead?' .

He felt a sudden queer twisting inside, but he took care not to show it. 'My daddy loved something,' he said. His mouth became grim.

'Your mother?'

'Her, too, I guess. She died before I knew much about things, so I don't remember. But later daddy got married again. I was maybe seventeen. This gal was singing in a show down to San Antone when he found her. He sure loved her, Miss Colter—she was one of the few living things daddy ever loved.'

'And what happened?'

'It wasn't two years before she ran off with somebody and broke daddy's heart—and like to broke everything else he owned, too. I tell you now, Miss Colter, daddy finally died because after she left, *he was ready to die*. He wouldn't have let himself die otherwise.'

Her eyes switched back and forth as they looked into his. 'Go on,' she said. 'What's the rest?'

Randall shrugged. 'It's just I don't have to touch a hot stove to know it burns. All I have to do is see somebody else do it.'

Pat Colter shook her head slowly. 'I'm sorry for you, Lige Randall,' she said.

He got up suddenly and faced her. His dark eyes flickered for a moment on the edge of anger. Then, he grabbed her roughly, pulled her towards him, and kissed her hard upon the lips.

'Don't ever be sorry for me,' he said. 'Don't ever.'

He turned and stomped into the house.

five

LIGE RANDALL, with John Colter and Doctor Levi, topped a rise with a nap of dry, yellow grass and below, clustered about the stream and its cottonwood grove, was the town and county seat of Tesqua. It was Randall's first day of freedom. The doctor had pronounced him fit to ride, and had brought the message that Epifanio was in the town buying a few more supplies, expecting him if he could come. Doctor Levi said Randall could return with him, and John Colter said he'd ride along too. He claimed business in town, though Ma Colter said he probably just wanted to go on and have a drink with the doctor. 'I do, too, have business,' he said. 'Young Bob Petersen went to town to fetch me some bob wire and staples two days ago—he ain't come back yet. I want to see what happened to him and three dollars and sixty cents o' my cash.'

The three men paused atop the rise for a moment to look at the town. There were quite a few new buildings, distinguishable from the old because the 'dobe hadn't dried yet and was darker. Colter pointed out the new church and Randall saw that the roof was on it.

'A real town—that's what it will be some day,' said Doctor Levi. 'We are depending on this.'

Randall looked at him. 'You, too, Doc?'

'Yes. With everybody else—I dream. This surprises you? I want to have a hospital here some day.'

'Where'd you get the sick folks?' asked Randall.

'They will come along—with the well. But more than

this, Lige. I want a place to learn. So little we know. Ague—blackwater fever—what brings them? Should you take out the vermiform appendix for corruption of the bowels—is this worth the risk when nearly everybody dies afterward? So many things. Only when you've got a place to bring sick people and study them can you learn. Out here, maybe I could do that without interference. Maybe here it would be a fresh start—no superstition to fight.'

'I don't cut sign on you, Doc.'

Dr. Levi smiled sadly. 'Why did I come out to this place—did you ever wonder?'

'Yes, why did you?'

'I was in a big city before. Never mind which one. Sometimes when you took a chance and cut open your patient you took your own life into your hands, too. You couldn't explain the patient would have died anyway. This was no excuse.'

'Got into trouble, that it, Doc?'

The doctor looked at him expressionlessly.

'Well, stick around,' said Randall. 'You ought to have plenty of business before the railroad gets here.'

Colter looked at Randall quietly. 'You aiming to make this business for him?'

'I'm not going out of my way to do it,' said Randall, meeting Colter's even look. 'But I expect some folks might push me into it. It usually happens that way.'

They moved into the town at a slow walk. It was mid-afternoon; the sky was cloudless, and the shadows on the dust were dark violet and sharp-edged. But there was the smell of imminent frost in the air.

Dr. Levi's office and living quarters were near the "Gran Quivira" saloon, which, even more than the low courthouse, was considered the center of town. They dismounted here.

'I expect I owe you a bill,' Randall said to the doctor.

'You have to worry about it? Right now you are short on cash—you think I don't know? All right. Some day you'll have more money. Maybe then you can do something for my hospital.'

Randall shook his head. 'I want to know what I owe you, exact. I'll give you my I.O.U. Let's keep everything businesslike.'

The doctor looked at him for a long time. 'If this is the way you prefer.'

'That's the *only* way I do things,' said Randall.

'So little we know,' said Dr. Levi, shaking his head. 'So little about the body—and so much less about the mind.'

Randall and Colter left the little doctor at his office and crossed the street to the "Gran Quivira." Randall figured he'd find Epifanio, or word of his whereabouts, there. It was slightly more crowded than the last time Randall had entered. Men lined the bar, and in the rear area several poker tables were going strong.

'Just like I figured,' said John Colter. He was staring at one of the tables in the rear. Four men were playing poker. Among them Randall recognized Colter's young hand, Bob Petersen, a slim, loose-jointed youth, who was trying to grow a beard, but had succeeded only in sprouting several irregular patches of dirty blond down on his cheeks and chin. He was intent upon his cards.

'Looks like your boy forgot the wire and staples,' said Randall.

'Damn young fool,' said Colter. He spat to the side, then wiped his mustache. 'First he comes and says he don't want to draw his pay every month—I better save it for him. He's goin' to buy hisself some land and marry a plump gal who knows how to cook good, he says. If'n he can find one. That's the big story he tells me. Now,

look at him. Gamblin' away his I.O.U.'s—and them fellers know he's got it in back pay.'

Randall shrugged. 'It's his business, if he wants to do it that way.'

'My business,' said Colter, 'when I need every hand so bad.' The old rancher stalked forward, rolling in his gait a little in the way of a man who feels more at ease on a horse, and as he approached the table, the other players looked up one by one, quickly sensing his attitude. Randall followed along idly.

There was one man at the table who continued to stare at Colter, even after the others had turned their attention back to their cards. Something about him caught Randall's interest immediately. He was a big man, somewhere in his thirties, and his strength was just beginning to turn to fat. He had huge shoulders, and he kept them hunched forward over the table, as though he felt they were too much to carry gracefully. In a way, he was a handsome man, with his regular features and deep-set, dark, intelligent eyes, but when you looked at him, you had the feeling that his good looks were about to disappear in the encroachment of flesh.

Colter saw that this man was staring at him. He nodded quietly and said, 'How do?'

'Like to join the game, mister?' said the big-shouldered man. His voice was positive, almost arrogant: it was the voice of someone used to command. It struck Randall as military, even before he noticed that this man wore old officer's trousers, Union side, from the war. Then he saw his hat, set aside on a chair by the table. It was a dark felt with the crossed rifles of infantry pinned to the front.

Colter was still looking at him. 'Thanks,' he said, 'but I wouldn't care to join right now. I come to take my boy home—Bob Petersen here.'

Young Petersen blinked up at his employer. His eyes were red-rimmed. There was a tumbler of whiskey at his place, and he took a nervous sip from it. It was clear he wanted to defy Colter—no doubt to assert a youthful hankering for independence—but now that he had come to the point of actually doing it, he was finding the habit of obeying Colter a little hard to break.

Randall had been watching this exchange with passing interest, no more. He was about the turn away, go to the bar and begin asking about Epifanio's whereabouts, when he noticed a tobacco sack in the big man's shirt pocket—the man with the officer's trousers and the large military voice. The cardboard tab hung loose, outside the pocket. The printing on it said: GOLD DUST—the same kind of tab Randall had found in that concealing clump of juniper.

Of course it was no real evidence that the big ex-soldier had fired those shots. But GOLD DUST was not a common brand, and the coincidence was strong enough to keep him from returning to the bar for the time being.

The ex-soldier was saying, 'You're John Colter, aren't you, sir? Like to introduce myself. Captain Mackey—everyone calls me Cap. It's be a pleasure to have a friendly game with you, Colter.'

'I thought the war was over, Mackey,' said Colter. His eyes didn't move.

'What's that? Why, sure it's over.'

'Then you ain't a real captain no more.'

Mackey frowned. 'Some of us keep the title, Colter. Some of us are proud of what we did. Not everybody did his part in the late unpleasantness.'

As Mackey said this, Randall noticed that he glanced briefly at another man of the group at the table. This man, on Mackey's right, was as young as Petersen, except for his eyes. They were dull, sickly-looking eyes—the eyes

of a man without any inner feeling. The man had a loose, ugly underlip that hung like a slice of raw flesh from his half-open mouth, that held an unchanging unmeant smile. He listened to all the conversation, but Randall had the feeling his attention was mainly upon Mackey, and that he was waiting for a cue.

Colter now ignored Mackey and turned to his hand, young Petersen. 'Better come on back with me, Bob,' he said.

'It ought to be plain enough,' interrupted Mackey, 'that Mr. Petersen wants to stay. He's a grown man, Colter. He can make up his own mind about things.'

Colter continued to address Petersen. 'They're usin' you, boy. They got you drinkin' and playin' here, knowin' I'm short-handed. Now they figure on startin' a fuss. Anything to keep me hoppin', so's I'll get disgusted and sell out. Can't you see how it goes?'

The young man with the loose under-lip started to get up and Mackey said sharply, 'Sit down, Wilmer!' Wilmer sat down again, and Mackey leaned back in his chair and looked up at Colter lazily. 'You're saying things you might have to back up, Colter.'

Colter said to Petersen, 'Let's go, Bob.'

The old man was unarmed, but he was not afraid. Randall stood and watched, resenting the admiration for the rancher that rose within him—he didn't want to admire anyone he might have to tangle with some day. But he was impressed by Colter's quiet, elusive air of command, his way of controlling this situation without any perceptible gestures or any particular words. He stood there, calmly holding young Petersen with his eyes, and all the others looked at him tautly, and he looked as though he didn't know they existed.

The moment hung, and finally Bob Petersen lowered his eyes, shrugged, and rose from his chair. He scooped

his small pile of money from the table and put it into his pocket. 'Well, I'm kinda tired playin' poker anyway,' he said, and his voice cracked in the middle of the sentence.

Colter stood to one side and let Petersen walk out first. Then he turned his back and followed in his long-legged, rolling walk.

When the two men left the room, Randall realized how quiet it had been for the past few minutes. Now people turned back to their drinks and their conversations, and the bustle and stir rose once more to normal. Randall turned thoughtfully toward the bar. Behind him he heard Cap Mackery call in a loud voice, 'All right, boys, let's get on with the game!'

To Randall's surprise Epifanio was at the far end of the bar staring at him impassively. He went to the fat Mexican's side.

'Hello, *cuate*,' said Epifanio.

'Hello, yourself.'

'How are you feeling?'

Randall shrugged. 'Good as new, I reckon.'

'Your face, it don't look so good. Pretty white.'

'Needs some sun, that's all. Got to get to work. How're things going?'

'Pretty good. I build almost all the house now.'

'Fine!' Randall nodded. 'Now we'll get ourselves a few more head and get ready for winter. You ask them Mexican friends o' yours about winter hay?'

'Si.' Epifanio nodded, too. The plan was to buy winter hay on credit with the small herd as security. Randall knew the bank in Tesqua wouldn't consider so small and shaky a transaction, but he figured the Mexican farmers might do it under Epifanio's persuasion. 'Everything okay,' said Epifanio. Randall signalled for drinks, and when the sad-eyed bartender brought them, Epifanio

said, 'I have lots of talk with these people. Senor Montoya, Senor Trujillo, Senor Valdez—well, you don' know them all. They live here a long time, *cuate*. They know what is happening.'

Randall tossed his drink down. 'Something happening?'

'This man playing the cards.' Epifanio looked in Mackey's direction. '*El capitan*, no?' He grinned sardonically. 'The rich man, Senor Grew, brings him here. He is supposed to be the office manager for Senor Grew—but he don' stay much in the office. And the one beside him. The one with the big lip. I can't keep his name in my head—'

'Wilmer?'

'*Si*. That is the name. *El capitan* brings him along, too. He is just out from the *juzgado*.'

'Looked like he might be a jailbird.' Randall was staring at the poker table, too. 'Looked like he might be a gun-poke, too.'

'*Si*. He was in jail for shooting somebody. The first day he is in town he shows everybody how he can shoot.'

'He did?'

'He was throwing whiskey bottles in the air, then he shoots them. Everybody says he is pretty good. Pretty fast. I tell you something, *cuate*. I come in here and see you standing near this table—I was a little worried. That's why I keep quiet and don' say hello.'

'Don't worry about me, *amigo*. I'm not fighting any of Colter's fights for him—or anybody else. I'll have enough of my own before long.'

'*Si*,' said Epifanio thoughtfully. 'Maybe with these people. Maybe with this Senor Grew, and *el capitan*, and this young gun-boy—how do you call him?'

'Wilmer. What are you getting at, Epi?'

'Maybe pretty good if you show them quick who is

the best man around here. Maybe you save some trouble later, no?’

‘Maybe,’ said Randall slowly. ‘Maybe so, at that.’

As he watched he saw that the poker game had come to a halt and that Captain Mackey was talking earnestly with Wilmer, leaning close to him, keeping his voice low. The boy was grinning his vapid grin and nodding. Abruptly Wilmer ‘rose from the table, awkward and gangling, almost knocking his chair over behind him, and then he began walking towards the front door. As he crossed the room, Randall noticed, he was no longer awkward. He had a cat’s walk—a moccasin walk, with his toes turned inward and striking the floor lightly with each step. He kept his loose-jointed arms curved at his sides and his wrists hooked. His pistol scabbard was strapped tightly to his right leg with rawhide.

‘I got a feeling,’ said Randall in a low voice. ‘A feeling he’s going out to make some trouble for Colter.’

‘You think so, *cuate*?’ Epifanio’s tone was noncommittal.

‘I owe Colter a little something for putting me up when I was stove in,’ said Randall. ‘And I hate to be beholden to folks.’

‘What you want to do?’

‘Let’s go out,’ said Randall, putting down his empty glass. ‘Let’s go outside and see.’

There was the bright sun and the loose yellow dust on the street that came up in tiny puffs as you scuffed though it. The sun was warm on the cheek, but there was a faint chill in the blue shadow, away from the sun. It was midday and the town was very quiet.

Wilmer’s plan was clear from the beginning.

Colter and young Bob Petersen had gone into the mercantile—the old man still wanted his wire and staples. It

was only a few steps from the "Gran Quivira" to the mercantile, but, in the way of cowboys, they had unhitched, mounted, ridden, dismounted, and hitched again—rather than walk. Their horses were at the rail in front of the mercantile now. Wilmer was across the street, in front of the courthouse. Portales shaded the walk in front of the courthouse, and he leaned against one of the heavy poles supporting them. He lounged with such forced casualness that his twisted hips seemed out of joint. He watched the door of the mercantile with a blank, dull-eyed expression.

Epifanio stayed at the corner of the "Gran Quivira." Randall walked slowly toward the mercantile, hoping to arrive at exactly the right time.

Well, it had begun. He had known that he'd have to fight other men when he first started out to build his own spread out of nothing but dry land up here in New Mexico. He had not considered this consciously, but he had naturally assumed that there would be moments of violence, as inevitable as flash floods or thunderstorms or days of drought. He had watched his daddy make the first Double Running R out of nothing, and he knew no other way in which it could be done . . .

Colter and Petersen came out upon the street.

Randall watched closely. He wondered which of them Wilmer would call. He figured it would be Petersen. Colter was well liked, a man of substance—it might raise too much of a howl if he was gunned down in a prodded fight right now. Petersen was just another hand, and young and foolish enough so that folks would believe he'd somehow gotten himself into a genuine mess with the gun-poke, Wilmer.

Colter and Petersen got ready to mount.

'You! Petersen!' Wilmer called from across the street. His voice had a sharp, unpleasant twang.

Petersen turned slowly from the near side of his horse. He saw Wilmer louncing there, and Randall knew from the sudden freezing of his expression that he understood immediately what was about to happen. He moved slowly away from his horse, into the clear. Colter froze at the side of his own horse and watched.

‘You walked off with some money wasn’t your’n!’ Wilmer called. He still had his back to the post; he was as relaxed as a mountain cat. Only his eyes were tense, unmoving.

‘The hell I did!’ Petersen called back. He wasn’t afraid—or if he was, he wasn’t showing it. The boy had the makings of a man in him. He stood there, ready, his own right hand slightly hooked at his side.

Colter watched with no expression, his large gray mustache accentuating the tight line of his mouth. Randall had noticed before that he carried no weapon and had asked him about it, and Colter had answered, ‘Never pack a gun ’less I know I need it for sure.’ Randall was certain that Colter, if he had been armed now, would have taken the fight from young Petersen. But for the moment he could only watch.

‘You callin’ me a liar, Petersen?’ shouted Wilmer. There was almost a smile in his voice. In and around his words, the meaning unspoken but still there and still plenty clear, he was saying: *We both know I’m forcing this, don’t we?—and there’s nothing you can do but go along with it.* ‘You tryin’ to threaten me?’ he added, aloud.

Randall stepped forward, into the sun, and into sight.

‘I’m callin’ you a liar, Wilmer!’ he said.

It surprised the gun-hand considerably, as Randall had known it would. Randall kept walking toward him, steadily, without a break in his swift pace.

He kept talking.

'I was there, Wilmer, when Petersen here cashed out. I saw the whole thing. So I'm not only calling you a liar, Wilmer, I'm calling you a skinny, no-good, pimple-faced, plain-and-fancy, fourteen-carat skunk. You hear me, Wilmer? I'm calling you that any time I see you. And I'm calling for you to do something if you don't like it. You make a move right now, Wilmer—one little wiggle of that skinny finger on your gun hand—go ahead, make it, Wilmer—and you're going to be sitting in the dust, gut-shot, and staring at a hole in your belly and wondering when it's going to start hurting! You listening, Wilmer?'

He was almost upon the man now. He was thinking of the things his daddy had taught. First—be ready to fight. Be absolutely ready for it, and *want* to do it. Then, start calling the tune before the other fellow has a chance to do it. Keep calling it. (And stay ready to fight—don't let yourself think for a moment it's going to be avoided.) What you're feeling, daddy said, will get into your eye and into your voice when you talk, and the other fellow will know it. Don't *count* on his backing down—but the chances are he will.

Wilmer was still staring, not quite sure what was happening to him. He was, in a sense, hypnotized by Randall's hard stare and by his unwavering talk.

'Try me, Wilmer. Try me when you feel the call. There won't even be anybody to go to your funeral, Wilmer—just the Mexicans we hire to dig the hole and drop you in it. Maybe one of 'em'll be good enough to say a prayer for you, though you won't deserve it. So anytime you feel lucky, Wilmer, try me!'

Then Wilmer did start to move. Randall was within reaching distance by now. He kicked Wilmer's hand as it drew the pistol, and the pistol dropped. He backed Wilmer against the wooden pillar supporting the portales

and struck him many times, in the face, and in the softest part of his midriff. He kept hitting him until he dropped, his face covered with blood, and his eyes rolled upward, seeing nothing for a while.

The crowd had gathered by now, and most of the faces were staring at Randall with a kind of awe, but neither Randall nor Epifanio gave anyone a second glance. They mounted together and rode out of town, not slowly but in no special hurry.

John Colter and young Bob Petersen caught up with them as they topped the rise just west of the town.

'Hold on there, Randall!' said Colter, cantering alongside and worrying his horse down to a walk. He wiped his mustaches with the back of his free hand.

'Something you want, Mr. Colter? I have to get back to my place pretty quick. I been away some time.' Randall spoke to him coolly.

'Doggone it, Randall, you don't have to act uppity and strange with me! You're thinkin' I come here to thank you for takin' away Bob Petersen's fight, and you're thinkin' you don't want to hear it--ain't that the truth now, ain't that what you're thinkin'?'

Randall stared for a moment, then said, 'Something else special on your mind, Mr. Colter?'

'Damn it, haul back them reins and listen a minute!' snapped Colter. Randall halted his animal. Colter put both hands on the saddle horn and leaned forward, staring directly into Randall's eyes. 'I got just one question, young man. Would you have drew faster than Wilmer if you'd tried?'

'If he'd thought about it too early he'd be dead now,' said Randall.

Colter nodded. 'That's what I wanted to know. You're a gun artist, Lige Randall, and any other time we wouldn't be so sure we'd want one in these parts. But

we're goin' to be glad for one before long. I can see that after what happened today.'

'What are you driving at, Mr. Colter?'

'Hammond Grew and these pet coyotes of his—Cap Mackey and the rest—they're goin' to get meaner every day now. We need somebody on our side who's—now don't take no offence 'cause I say this—who's just as mean.'

'I ain't on nobody's side, Mr. Colter,' said Randall. 'The little favor I did today—I figure that clears part of the score between you and me. So right now, Mr. Colter, I'm going back to my spread and mind my own business. I'd figure it was the right thing if you'd do the same.'

Colter shook his head. 'You're on our side already, only you don't know it. But you ain't going to listen to me, I can see that.'

'That's right. I'm not going to.'

'So it's going to take one o' Grew's men to convince you. And not by speakin' polite, like I'm doing now.'

'We'll see, Mr. Colter,' said Randall.

'Sure,' said Colter, picking up his reins. 'We'll see.'

Randall and Epifanio rode in silence and at a light jog, putting the town of Tesqua far behind them. Now it was well past mid-afternoon. The sun in the open sky had been glaring at the raw land all day without stirring it to life. But now, far to the south, where there was a flat stretch of prairie dotted with tufts of charriso, Randall saw a cloud of dust rise suddenly from the earth in a quick spiral and begin racing in an erratic course towards the horizon.

'*Bruja*,' grunted Epifanio, squirting at it.

'Think it's a witch, do you?' Randall allowed himself a small grin.

‘*La Bruja, el brujo.* One of these,’ said Epifanio.
‘*Una anima perdida.*’

‘Lost soul, huh?’

‘There is no more summer,’ said Epifanio. ‘The air is cool now. You have seen this kind of dancing dust before when the air is cool? No. Only in summer. Why you think we see one now, *cuate*?’

‘I don’t know. You tell me why.’

‘Maybe you don’t want to hear.’

Randall laughed. ‘Go on, Epi. Let’s hear it.’

‘What you see there,’ said Epifanio solemnly, ‘that is your father.’

‘That’s daddy?’ Randall lifted his laugh and tossed it high. ‘Epi, if that’s daddy—what’s he doing scooting around these parts?’

Epifanio shrugged and said, ‘Who knows why these things happen, eh? But maybe this time I think I know. Just a little bit, I know.’

‘What do you know?’

‘Your father he comes to say, “*Cuidado*” to give you warning. I have this feeling.’

‘Well,’ said Randall, ‘get rid of it and let’s ride. We got work to do, and that don’t leave us any time worry about something harmless, s a dust devil.’

Epifanio shrugged again and sighed. Once more they rode silently. Westering, the sun paled. The fat, white clouds above the mountain peaks shriveled and became darker.

SIX

IN THE weeks that followed, Randall forgot the Colters and Hammond Grew and Cap Mackey and the young gunman, Wilmer, in the press of work. He forgot his troubles and bitterness, too, at least temporarily.

It was time to prepare for winter. There were only the two of them, but Randall worked with the concentration inspired by ownership, and Epifanio, as always, was equal to three or four ordinary hands. Epifanio wasn't sure of his own age and thought it might be forty-something, and Randall judged it to be close to fifty. But he could outride and outrope most youngsters. He hadn't asked Epifanio to come up from Texas with him, not in so many words, and Epifanio hadn't requested outright to come along. It simply seemed natural and unquestionable to both that he ride with Randall. Maybe you could say Epifanio was part of the inheritance, part of the salvage from the broken empire. He had started long ago with old Rufus Randall, back in the days when Rufus killed his first man in a row over a herd of mavericks. In Lige Randall's youth he had been mentor, companion, and playmate to the boy. He had taught him all he knew of horsemanship, and had imparted some of his Spanish feeling for it. He had been slim and vain of his profile and mustache and sideburns in those days; he had had several girl friends scattered about the country, all of them, no doubt, hoping he would marry them, but Epifanio was fat and comfortable now, and it always surprised Randall a little to see him ride so easily, like an

overgrown melon balanced precariously on the saddle.

So now they rode hard together, tending to the waterings, digging L trenches for slow, even drainage in the dry places, herding the short yearlings to winter pasture. They dug a shallow well below the frost line, buttressed the inside with rocks to keep it from caving when the earth froze and shrank, then boxed it over. They worked on the cabin, building a rock and 'dobe fireplace, tightening the chinks. Randall had no cash to buy floor lumber and asked Epifanio what he thought ought to be done.

'*No es dificil*,' said Epifanio. 'We make 'dobe floor. A good one, for keeping out the cold even better.'

For this they rode north into the narrow strip of government land again, and found an old, unbranded cow about ready to die of living too long. While they were cutting it out of the brush Epifanio saw the tracks. He studied them a little, then rode over to where Randall was working on the animal.

'Lots of riders,' said Epifanio. 'They come this way.'

'Colter's men getting strays, I reckon.'

'You think he cares we take this cow?'

'I haven't the smallest idea,' said Randall, 'and what's more I don't give a whoop.'

They drove the cow back to the cabin, slaughtered it, and caught the blood in buckets. Epifanio showed him how to mix the blood with dirt spaded from a nearby arroyo, and how to spread the gummy mixture over the rock laid on the cabin floor. In a few days it hardened and turned a deep mahogany color. It was as handsome a floor as Randall had seen anywhere. They dressed the hide of the cow and gave it a preliminary smoking so that it could be sold for a dollar or two the next time one of them rode into Tesqua. They hung the carcass out on a rack the first night, meaning to cut it up and cache it the next day.

There was a wind from the north that night, and it was truly cold for the first time that year. They sat by the fire in their cabin and used some of their precious store of coffee. Epifanio had ridden into the foothills of the Sangre de Cristos to gather piñon wood, and its dry, incense-like fragrance filled the little dwelling as they sat, drank, talked, and smoked. At least, Epifanio smoked; Randall lipped his usual unlighted cigarette.

'We're going to have to go some to make it this winter,' Randall said finally.

'I think we can do it, *cuate*,' said Epifanio. He was staring into the fire with his opaque eyes, and they glittered with reflected light.

'Not with the cash we got. Or maybe I ought to say, the cash we *haven't* got.'

'We don' need so much cash, huh? We don' wear so fancy clothes; we don' drink no whiskey.' He sighed a little. 'Of course, some time I think I like to have a woman—but maybe I got to wait, no?'

Randall grinned. 'At your age I reckon you can.'

'At my age is worse. I think if I wait too long next time is going to be too late!'

'Wait just a little, Epi. 'Nother year or two. Then you can buy every pretty Mexican woman you see from here to the border.'

'And what about you, *cuate*? What you want to buy when you are rich?'

'Me? Why, I hadn't thought. Nothing in particular, I guess.'

'Maybe you like to do something. What you want to do when you are rich?'

'Why,' said Randall, thinking hard, 'get richer, I reckon!'

Epifanio sighed and shook his head, but his disapproval escaped Randall.

‘Serious, now,’ said Randall. ‘We need some cash pretty bad. There’s more tools we’ve got to buy. The flour and bacon’ll be gone soon. And that winter hay we’ve got isn’t going to last long if we have a cold spell—specially if we want to work the horses.’

‘How much we got?’

‘Maybe a hundred dollars. It won’t last long.’

‘That is all we got, *cuato*?’

‘We spent plenty getting here—remember?’

And Randall thought back to when they’d set out. He had a thousand dollars, and a hundred thousand distant, forgotten acres his daddy had won long ago in a poker game. That was all that was left of the Double Running R when the creditors and lawyers got through with it. He knew now that, like red-necked buzzards, they had all been waiting for the old man to die. He still didn’t know exactly how they’d cheated him, the son, out of all of it—if cheating it had been. It seemed he understood it when they went over it step by step, but when he tried to think about it afterward, as a whole, his head swam. They said his father had been living on the edge of ruin all this time. Well, himself, he would always pay cash, and stay away from lawyers. That was one lesson he’d learned. And he’d like to keep from borrowing, but he didn’t see how he could avoid some of that at the beginning. As soon as he could show he had the beginnings of a cattle ranch he’d take a mortgage on it from the bank, and in the next few years to come he’d pay that off as quickly as possible. But now it seemed he might have to try to borrow even before that time.

‘Okay,’ said Epifanio. ‘What you want to do?’

‘I don’t know. I expect I can dig up some cash if I try hard. But it don’t set right with me.’

‘From Senor Colter, perhaps?’

Randall shook his head quickly. ‘Might have to buck

old Colter one of these days, and I want to feel free to do it.'

'Maybe we can do with just this hundred dollar, huh? If we eat meat—don't buy no more food—'

'The idea tempts me,' said Randall.

'This cow we kill for the 'dobe floor,' said Epifanio. 'That's a lot of meat, no? Maybe not so good meat, but it fills the belly.'

'We'll see,' said Randall.

It was a quiet, clear night outside. The mountain sky at night is black, there is not a trace of blue in it, and it is even blacker for the stars. They are all there; none of the stars has been left out. The night is clearest when the air is cold.

Randall, breaking through the thin crust of sleep, heard only the slightest noise outside. He was up immediately, and through the saddle blankets Epifanio had hung across the entrance in place of a door.

He saw the graceful, padded form of the mountain lion, its flesh loose and rippling because under it there was already more muscle than was needed: he saw it bound away from the wooden rack they had built, and, incredibly, all of that ancient cow's carcass was in its mouth. It carried that weight, and still it could leap.

His pistol was in his hand and he fired three times after the disappearing form. The sound echoed somewhere, mocking him. There was silence after that and when he and Epifanio looked all around the shelter later, they found only the faintest traces of the big cat. It would be in high ground, miles away by now.

'But he didn't take that carcass far,' said Randall grimly.

Epifanio made a somewhat drawn-out grunting noise.

It was as close as he ever came to a laugh. 'Not much meat on that carcass now, I think.'

'That cat took it from me. It was mine, and he stole it from me.'

Epifanio looked at Randall more closely. Randall was staring into the darkness beyond the shelter, and his mouth was as thin and compressed as a crack in a cliff.

'The cat, he was animal. He don' know if anybody owns that cow,' said Epifanio.

'He took it from me,' said Randall, still staring.

Epifanio shrugged and went back to bed.

In the east it was gray now with the false dawn. That was enough light. He would have to get to that carcass before full daylight, anyway; the lion would never come back to it then. Nor was it certain he'd come back to it even now—he wouldn't like the man smell in these parts. Chances were he'd dragged it, fed quickly and nervously, and then loped for the hills when Randall and Epifanio had tramped about in the vicinity looking for sign.

But that creature had his punishment coming. No living thing intruded on the Randalls like that and went unpunished. As he thought these things, Randall knew, in one part of him, that he wasn't thinking quite clearly and sensibly, but he didn't care.

He set out, tracking carefully. He found the last trace of the lion they had seen, a place where he had dragged the carcass through some juniper and then across a platform of hard rock. He searched on the other side of the rock, squinting hard in the dim light, until he found the trail again, and then he followed it once more. He tracked as all outdoorsmen track; as an Indian tracks, noting the sign when possible, but in a greater sense taking on some of the aspects of the animal he followed so that a strange, indefinite urge seemed to carry him

along in the same direction. The sign he found was not so much guidepost as confirmation that he was still headed the right way. He had tracked living things in this way almost since he first learned to walk. It was not quite instinct that carried him along, but it was something close to it.

He found the carcass almost an hour later. It was wedged in the fork of a dead scrub oak. He could smell the smell of lion in the vicinity. He found the wind with a pinch of tobacco and then chose a hiding place behind two rocks with a V-shaped opening between them.

He waited. The sky in the east turned from gray to slate blue and then began to flush at the edges with a warmer color. One leg, bent under him, was becoming numb, and he was about to shift to comfort when he saw the faintest movement on the bush-dotted slope beyond the carcass. A moment later he caught sight of the mountain lion, padding noiselessly from growth to growth, rock to rock. Every few moments it would pause to lift its head warily and stare suspiciously in one direction or another. Once it seemed to look directly at him, and he held his breath to keep himself absolutely still.

Then suddenly the animal was at the carcass, ripping away a foreleg. Its shoulder was broadside to Randall. Randall lifted his pistol, aimed carefully, and, steadying the weapon with both hands, squeezed the trigger. The lion jerked in surprise, then died quickly, with little noise, only its hind foot twitching for a few moments as it lay there.

Epifanio came upon Randall many minutes later. Randall was standing there, still as death, staring at the lion he'd shot.

Epifanio's eyes widened. "Pretty good, *cuate*!"

'He stole from me,' said Randall.

'I heard you shoot, so I come quick,' said Epifanio.

‘They won’t take what belongs to us. None of ’em,’ Randall said.

‘Pretty good lion,’ said Epifanio. ‘We skin him now, huh?’

Randall turned toward him quickly, ‘Just leave him lay there. I don’t want his skin around.’

‘Hey, what’s the matter with you, *cuate*?’ said Epifanio. ‘We can get maybe a couple dollar for that skin.’

‘Leave him lay, I said!’ said Randall sharply.

Epifanio shrugged. ‘Sometimes I don’t understand you so good.’

‘You don’t have to understand,’ said Randall. He took a last look at the dead lion then turned away, as though reluctantly. ‘Let’s go back and saddle the horses.’

‘What you want to do?’

‘I’m riding into town to try to raise that money.’

seven

HAMMOND GREW'S office was on the main street of Tesqua, and when Randall arrived there, in the deep of the afternoon, all the town was quiet. Anglo-Saxon bustle and enterprise hadn't yet been able to shake Spanish devotion to the midday siesta.

A small sign marked Grew's place of business. The office was in a frame building, shaded by wooden portales, and it was jerry-built and crude, like nearly every other structure in town, but there was a certain dignity Grew seemed to maintain. His sign was smaller, and the lettering more careful and in a more conservative style than elsewhere in Tesqua. The wooden walk outside the door was always carefully swept.

There was a large window, and Randall saw that the interior was dim. He entered. There were several clean desks in a neat row and some framed etchings on the walls, most of them architectural scenes. Randall squinted at one and saw that the fancy script below the picture was in a foreign language. German, or maybe French, he expected.

At any rate, no one was here. He debated sitting in one of the swivel chairs to wait for someone—preferably Grew himself—and that was when he heard the sound of a metallic snap through the partly open back door.

He walked to the door and pushed it open idly with his fingertips. There was an area in the rear surrounded by the crumbling adobe wall and the sides of an old building and court. Cap Mackey was standing there, his

legs spread, and his back to Randall. He was wearing his officer's trousers and his black campaign hat. His right arm was extended rigidly, and he was aiming a long, heavy-barreled pistol. Against the far adobe wall there was a wooden plank about three feet tall carved roughly to resemble the shape of a man, with a head like a stone, and shoulders that widened slightly beneath it.

Cap Mackey took a deep breath, squeezed carefully, and the pistol went *snap* again.

Randall shuffled his feet to announce his presence.

Mackey turned quickly, but without seeming unduly startled. His eyes took in all of Randall at once, scanning him quickly and efficiently. He twitched his big, flesh-padded shoulders in an odd, unconscious gesture, as though loosening them. 'Hello, Randall,' he said, and he was neither friendly nor hostile. He was alert.

'I see you know me,' Randall said.

Mackey nodded, still watching him carefully. 'Most everybody does, now.'

'They do? Why would they?'

'After that bit of medicine you made young Wilmer swallow down—'

'Mackey, where I come from the schoolboys take care of Wilmer's kind.'

Mackey tried a half-smile. 'I heard you'd said that. That's one thing you got to watch out for when you make yourself a reputation. What you say gets repeated. Folks like to hear.'

'That might be,' said Randall. He put his shoulder on the door jamb and began to roll a cigarette. 'I had a private conversation in mind today, though. With Mr. Grew. He around?'

'He'll be back after a bit. What'd you want to see him about?'

‘About that private conversation. If I told you, it wouldn’t be private any more, would it?’

Randall was smiling, and Mackey smiled in return. They stood there, taut and wary, both of them, and smiled at each other.

‘We should have met before this, Randall,’ Mackey finally said.

‘Think so?’

Mackey nodded. ‘Seems we both got the same interest in a thing or two.’

‘Like what?’

‘Using these, for one.’ Mackey hefted his weighty pistol.

‘You use that, do you?’

‘When I have to,’ said Mackey. His grin was set in his face now. ‘Or when I’m practicing up for when I have to.’

‘Like now,’ said Randall.

‘Like now. The army way. Dry shooting, we call it. But don’t make any mistake. I can do it wet, too.’

‘I’d like to see that sometime,’ said Randall.

‘And I’d like to see your own brand,’ said Mackey. ‘That is—if you *do* use that weapon of yours.’

Randall’s smile broadened and his eyes narrowed and became dreamy. He stood like that, lounging at the door jamb, for another hanging moment, his cupped paper in one hand, tobacco sack in the other—and then he moved. He moved so swiftly that his hand blurred. With no apparent connection between one instant and the next, his pistol suddenly exploded in his hand. It was pointed at the small, wooden target across the court. The report numbed the ear, and the echoes sounded in several semi-distant places. The wooden target seemed to twitch.

Cap Mackey’s grin stayed with him, and Randall had

to give him credit for not showing his surprise. He turned slowly, looked at the target, and saw the small hole near the bottom. He looked at Randall again. 'Not bad,' he said. 'Where'd you learn it?'

'My daddy had me drawing almost before I could lift a real gun,' said Randall. 'He had the blacksmith make me a little toy one to practice with. Got pretty good at it after a while. But, do you know something, Mackey? I believe right to the last, Daddy was better.'

'He must have been real fine,' said Mackey. He nodded. 'I always like to watch a good draw. It makes a good show.'

'Comes in handy now and then,' said Randall.

It was like sparring, the way they traded those careful grins. 'I wouldn't doubt it,' said Mackey. 'But, of course, the best thing is to put your ball where you want it. Exactly where you want it.'

'You want it in the man that's drawing on you,' said Randall.

'That's right. And you want it where it'll kill him dead. To keep him from getting off one in your direction. Like to see what I mean?'

'I wouldn't mind,' said Randall.

Mackey loaded his pistol from the cartridges in his belt. He didn't bother to holster and demonstrate his draw, but instead turned toward the target casually and pointed his weapon in that peculiar, stiff-armed way of his. He shot five times, quickly, and in succession. Randall saw the wooden head of the plank jerk slightly with each shot, and when it was finished, he saw that all five shots had made one large hole about the size of a quarter where the center of the man's forehead would be.

'Pretty good,' said Randall.

'I've done better,' said Mackey.

'Takes a little time to get 'em off the way you do, though.'

'I'll grant that,' Mackey said. 'But you're mighty sure about 'em when they do get off.'

'Interesting,' said Randall.

The unspoken thought they shared and understood between them seemed to hang in the air where they could almost see it. There was really only one way, they were thinking, to find out who was the better man. They'd both be curious about it, they were thinking, until the time they matched up against each other—if that time ever came.

Then Randall heard the front door swing open and footsteps coming toward him on the board floor. He turned and saw Hammond Grew. The little man was as carefully dressed as always in an expensive-looking suit, and his bright little eyes were darting about inquisitively.

'What's going on here? I heard shots—'

'Just Mr. Randall and I having a little target practice, boss,' said Mackey.

Grew shifted his eyes back and forth between them. 'Showing each other what you can do, eh? I rather thought you'd get around to it. Well—that's enough of it now. You're waking up the whole town. And drawing attention to my office here—the wrong kind of attention. I don't want this to happen again, is that understood? By both of you?'

Mackey shrugged his heavy shoulders.

Randall frowned and started to answer Grew, then remembered why he'd come, and choked back his antagonism. 'I came here to talk to you, Mr. Grew. In private.'

Grew surprised him. 'As a matter of fact, I was looking for you, Mr Randall. I'd heard you were in town.'

'If you're trying to buy my property again—'

Grew held up his hand quickly. 'Don't be worried about that, Randall. Of course, I'm glad to make you an offer on your land any time. But that wasn't what I wanted to see you about.'

'No?'

'No. I had a . . . well . . . a business proposition for you.'

'I had something of the same for you,' said Randall.

Grew nodded, smiling. 'Of course. You wanted to borrow some money.'

'Well—yes. I reckon I did.'

'Understandable. It always happens when a man undertakes an enterprise without sufficient capital. The expenses are always just a little more than you planned for—isn't that true?'

'Seem to be. This time, anyway.'

'So you need money.'

'I'll pay high interest on it, but I won't put up land for it. The bank won't lend it that way. I thought you might.'

'I think we'd better talk about this,' said Grew.

'Then you're not saying no.'

'We'll see. Randall—how'd you like to have dinner with me tonight?'

'Dinner?'

'That's the way I like to talk business.'

'Well, if that's your idea, I guess I got to go along with it.'

'Seven o'clock ? At the "Gran Quivera" ?'

'I'll be there.'

'I hope you will.' Grew smiled and glanced at Mackey. 'I hope you won't let any foolish rivalries with my office manager here lead to difficulties that might delay you.'

Grew showed a suggestion of a bow, turned, and left.

His exaggerated dignity, framed by his small stature, should have been comic, but somehow it was not. There was a dead earnestness about the man—a humorlessness, in spite of his easy smile—which lent a kind of dangerous force to everything he did or said.

When he was gone, Mackey stood there, taking the empty cartridge shells from his pistol, blowing through the barrel. 'That's lucky for you, Randall. He said I wasn't to touch a hair o' your head.'

'I didn't hear him say that.'

'The boss's wish. He don't have to say it in so many words. But it's the same as a command. That's what you learn in the army.'

'You should have stayed in the army, Mackey,' said Randall, turning to leave. 'I wonder how well you fit into things outside it. Maybe that's what's stuck in your craw.'

'How about yourself, Randall? What's stuck in *your* craw?'

'Nothing I know of.'

Mackey nodded sagely. 'That's the whole trouble. A fellow never really knows himself what's eatin' him, does he?'

Randall walked off with Mackey's challenging grin branded into his mind.

That evening he found himself in the rear of the "Gran Quivira" in a kind of alcove, with a heavy, green, tasseled curtain shutting out the view from the other tables. It was the saloon's nearest approach to a private dining room and had been installed by the proprietor at Hammond Grew's suggestion. Randall and Grew finished a meal of roast pork and potatoes, badly cooked, but served on Grew's own set of fancy Dresden china, which he kept in the hotel for occasions like this. There was also a bottle of yellow wine, which Grew said was

from France and which Randall didn't think much of. He thought it tasted sour.

But Grew was enjoying himself.

'Now, this is a more civilized way to talk things over, isn't it, Mr. Randall?' Grew's checks were thin and his eyes were like stickpin jewels. He seemed drunk, but Randall didn't believe he was drunk from alcohol, because he hadn't consumed that much. He seemed drunk with himself.

Beside Hammond Grew there was a woman. She had been introduced to Randall as Miss Morena, but Grew called her Dora. She had said almost nothing during the meal. Grew glanced at her every once in a while and let his eyes dwell upon her as though, between glances, he had forgotten her presence and was surprised and mildly pleased to find her there again. Once or twice he favored her with a brief, absent-minded smile and stroked her arm.

'Cigar, Mr. Randall?'

'All right. I don't recall as I've ever smoked one.'

'Really. Well, I grant these are too dry by the time they get here. But smoke one. We'll make you a happy slave to the cigar, sir. Sometimes there's more companionship in one than in a woman.'

He smiled at Dora Morena broadly.

Dora Morena, Randall judged, was in her early thirties. Her skin was olive and clear, her eyes warm and dark—she was a handsome, almost a beautiful, woman. Grew had explained that she owned a dress-making shop in Tesqua. Randall had caught her looking his way several times, as though to study him, but for some reason he could not believe he alone had aroused her special interest: he felt she might study any man this way the first time, simply because she was interested in men. She had quiet confidence with men, and by a

man this was instantly sensed, as a horse immediately senses the quality in a rider who can handle him.

Grew blew a thin stream of smoke from his cigar and watched it lose itself in the air. 'What is life, Mr. Randall?' he said. 'It's a succession of little things, that's all. A good cigar, a bottle of wine, a woman. We direct a great deal of effort toward these relatively unimportant things.'

'Can't say as I've looked much for *any* of those,' said Randall.

Grew stared at him sharply for a moment, balancing an expression of amusement on his face. 'Perhaps you're right,' he said. 'Perhaps there is more. Money for the things I've named, but beyond that . . . power. Power for its own sake, eh?'

'Never thought about it much,' said Randall. This kind of talk made him uncomfortable. He had brought Grew a simple business proposition, take it or leave it, and he didn't see why he had to put up with all this.

Grew seemed to have forgotten their business. He continued talking in this high-flown way. 'I had a great deal of power once,' he said. 'Then came this damnable sickness . . .' he tapped his breast bone . . . 'and after it struck I thought I wanted only to live. I came to this country. Then do you know what happened?'

'What happened?'

'I lived and discovered it wasn't enough. You're right, Randall. Power for its own sake is what drives some of us.'

'I didn't say that.'

'You don't have to say it, Randall. It's written all over you.'

Randall shrugged.

Grew was smiling in the way of a man with a secret.

'Let me show you what I mean by power for its own sake,' he said. He turned to Dora. She looked at him warily, as though past experience had taught her to be careful of this mood. 'Dora,' he said, 'you know I've no intention of marrying you, don't you?'

She frowned and looked in the other direction.

Grew chuckled softly. 'But you give yourself to me in the dim hope the miracle will come about. Don't you? And then you'll have what you want. Respectability. Isn't that true?'

'Hammond,' she said, 'you don't have to talk like this.'

'But I'm proving a point for Mr. Randall—his own philosophy, whether he knows it or not. Isn't it true, Dora, that you'd do better, if you wished, back at your old profession?'

'Hammond! Please!'

'You see? Your thirst for respectability is as strong as ours for power. You'll do anything to gratify it. You'll even sit here and take this kind of talk from me without a murmur.'

'I won't listen to it!' She started to rise.

'Sit down,' said Grew quietly.

'Hammond, I . . .'

'Sit down.'

She sat. Grew smiled again and turned to Randall. 'This is what I mean by power. I had no particular pleasure in bending Dora to my will just now. But knowing I can do it, anytime—that's the pleasure. Don't you agree?'

'I didn't care for the way you treated the lady,' said Randall, without an answering smile.

Grew laughed. 'Randall, you amaze me! You come to borrow money from me, but you're not afraid to disagree with me. Even come close to insulting me.'

‘I’ll never need money so bad I can’t say what I think,’ said Randall.

Grew, still laughing, nodded. ‘And you mean that, too! You’re an odd blend, Randall, of lofty principles and hard selfishness. Take some small advice from me. Be one or the other. Never both.’

Randall tried to keep his voice even. ‘For a moment there, it looked like we were finally going to talk about that money. Now you seem to be getting away from it again.’

‘All right, Randall. We’ll talk about it. You can leave now, Dora.’

‘I haven’t finished my wine.’

‘Take it with you.’

She hesitated, struggling with herself, before she said, ‘Yes, Hammond.’ She slipped out of the compartment.

‘Dora’s a good girl,’ said Grew affably. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright. ‘Not the prettiest nor the youngest hereabouts, but at least she has a style. I needn’t recall how she acquired it. Perhaps, entertaining the best male company as she did, she couldn’t help but acquire it.’

‘Look, Mr. Grew, what Miss Morena did or what she’s fixing to do . . . I don’t care about it.’

Grew looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. ‘That’s a shame, Randall. I’d hoped you’d share my interest in the fairer sex. I had an idea we’d be seeing something of each other and that we’d hit it off.’

‘What about the money, Mr. Grew?’

‘Yes. The money. Well . . . we come to that at last. You know you’re going to walk out of here with a sizeable sum tonight, don’t you?’

‘Well then the sooner the better. I bought a note at the printer’s. We can fill it out, and I’ll sign it now.’

‘Not so fast. I didn’t say anything about a loan.’

‘ But you said . . . ’

‘ I said you’d walk out with the money. I’m going to give you a chance to earn it, Randall.’

‘ Earn it?’

‘ By your peculiar talents. That was no small feat to walk up, disarm Wilmer, then whip him the way you did.’

Randall shook his head. ‘ I’m a cattleman. I don’t hire out as a gun-hand.’

‘ I don’t think, with what I have in mind, you’ll be needing to use a gun.’

‘ No?’

‘ It’s possible, but, not likely. You see, what I want to buy, Randall, is your reputation.’

‘ Reputation?’

‘ The one you made at Wilmer’s expense. I think I can safely say you’re known as a somewhat fearsome fellow in three counties by now.’

‘ Wilmer wasn’t much. Just practice.’

Grew smiled. ‘ Randall, you’re hard as nails, and smart—but still you can’t resist the childish boast. Perhaps that’s the Texan in you. Well, nevertheless, Mr. Randall, we can safely say that people in these parts will listen to you with a great deal of respect—no, let’s be honest. Let’s call it fear.’

‘ All right. That’s the way I want it.’

‘ Good! And that’s how you can be useful to me. You see, my office needs a buyer.’

‘ A buyer?’

‘ That’s right. As I explained to you before, I’m in the process of acquiring real estate. As an investment. It’s all going to go up when the railroad comes, and at that time I intend to sell again. It’s a simple way of making money. Or, if you will, acquiring power.’

‘ Go on, Mr. Grew.’

'Well, a great many people in these parts seem determined to hold on to their land. There's a certain amount of stubbornness.'

'And you want me to convince 'em they shouldn't?'

'In a nutshell, yes.'

'What makes you think I can? Even with this here reputation.'

'There will be helpful incidents from time to time which ought to add weight to your persuasions.'

'Cattle disappearing? Poisoned water? Shooting down a steer, maybe, when a man's fixing to put a loop on him?'

'That sort of thing, yes. Perhaps even a little more as time goes on. But, you see, Randall, you needn't be involved in any of this. That will be Cap Mackey's department. I merely need your presence afterward, when the landowner is asked to sell.'

Randall turned things over in his head for a moment. His cigar was getting short now. He decided definitely he didn't like cigars and put this one on the plate before him. 'Mr. Grew, wouldn't I kind of be going against myself? I'm a rancher and a landowner, too. Don't forget that.'

'I don't see where there's a conflict of interests,' said Grew. 'I've no interest in ranching, and any land I buy is merely to sell later. I think you must have understood this, or you wouldn't have come to me in the first place.'

'Maybe,' said Randall. 'Maybe so.'

'And you need the money. I think we can safely say that you won't have a herd next Spring—not even a small one—if you don't get it.' Grew took a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off five hundreds. 'An advance on your commissions, Randall, for some very easy part-time work. Two percent of all you buy for me. And don't forget the added advantage of being on my side.'

‘I’m on my own side, and aiming to keep it like that. But—I’ll take the money.’

Grew handed it to him. His smile was quieter now. ‘One thing ought to be understood, Randall, before you go.’

‘Yes?’

‘I said that people hereabouts would be afraid of you.’

‘I reckon some might.’

‘Well, I think it would be well for you to know—I’m not.’

Randall smiled. He moved his eyes across Grew’s slight frame, fastidious dress and soft hands. ‘You’re not, Mr. Grew?’

‘No,’ said Grew. ‘You see, I’ve had a chance to study you. You have a sort of code, Randall—you believe in what you regard as honor. Yet what you wish to be requires complete unscrupulousness. *Complete*, Mr. Randall—no deviations. Do you understand now?’

‘Understand what?’

‘That I’m not afraid of you,’ said Grew, ‘because I know where the chinks in your armor are.’

eight

THESE WERE busy days for Lige Randall, and there was no time to think. He plunged into his work as some men plunge into drink—fleeing silence and the pauses that bring on wonder and reflection. He buried what Grew had said about chinks in his armor deep in the muck at the bottom of his mind, and it lay there, dormant, along with the faint warnings he'd already received from Colter, Epifanio, Pat Colter, and his own conscience. He kept his eyes upon a horizon and dreamed of nothing but being the biggest man in these parts, as his daddy had been down in Texas, and he didn't even look beyond that goal. He had no idea what he'd do, or want to do, after he reached it. He did not think : *if* he reached it. There was not so much as a moment of doubt about that.

The night he received the money from Hammond Grew he slept in the hotel with the currency in his money belt. He could not find sleep in the soft bed. He tossed and thought about Grew, and his smile, and his assured way, and he was annoyed by the idea that maybe he was a little afraid of Grew. Sleep came at last, but it was punctured by both wakefulness and fretful dreams.

He awoke late the next morning and spent most of the early hours making badly needed purchases, at the mercantile, at the saddlery, and at the feed-and-grain store. He bought a small buckboard, second-hand, and left it at the livery stable for Epifanio to pick up later with a brace of horses.

He started out of town a little before noon. Tesqua was growing, he noticed as he rode through it; the houses and buildings were beginning to form clustered squares, and the spaces among them were becoming side streets. He passed the new church, its adobe walls still moist with new *vezo* plaster, a mud made of gypsum and smeared on by hand, and in the front yard of the church he saw a man transplanting several cactus plants for decoration.

The man straightened and wiped the sweat from his brow as Randall passed. He was young and muscular, with a short nose and square jaw. His eyes seemed to be looking for something to laugh about. His collar was open, and his shirt sleeves were rolled high.

'Morning,' he called, as Randall walked his horse past.

Randall nodded civilly and muttered in return.

'Pull up a spell!' said the young man. 'How about a drink of lemonade? I've got some back there.'

It suddenly came to Randall that this must be the new preacher, Tod Hurley. He didn't look much like a preacher. He didn't look as bookish and parsimonious as some of the preachers Randall had seen. Randall was mildly curious about him—especially since John Colter had hinted the man was sweet on his daughter. He sidled his horse over to the wall and let the reins droop. 'Thanks for the offer,' he said. 'Can't stop, though. Too much to do out at my place.'

'Well, I guess we're all pretty busy these days. Building things. Growing things. It's hard to realize, but we're making a new civilization out here.' Tod Hurley's eyes were open and frank—the wholesomeness of the man irritated Randall. The preacher somehow reminded him of buttermilk, which he never had liked. Hurley continued to smile at him. 'Hurley's my name. Tod Hurley.'

Randall nodded. 'The new preacher.'

Hurley's smile widened. His voice, for a young man's, was remarkably deep and resonant, and Randall had the notion they could hear him talking all the way back at the "Gran Quivira". 'Yes, sir, I'm the new preacher. But you don't have to say it like that. I'm not going to preach to you. The fact is, I'm hoping to keep the actual preaching to a minimum and concentrate on the more important work.'

'That so?' Randall tried to conceal his interest.

'Come find out for yourself. Service begins at eleven next Sunday.'

Randall smiled a little. 'I'll be honest with you, Reverend. I'm not much for church.'

Hurley stared at him for a moment, keeping the grin on his lips, but somehow keeping it out of his eyes, and then he snapped his fingers. 'I know who you are. You're Lige Randall.'

'I suppose Pat Colter told you about me.'

'No.' Hurley seemed amused. 'Her father and mother. Pat didn't mention you.'

'Oh,' said Randall. 'Well—' he fought a touch of confusion—'I meant either her or her folks. Anyway, I expect they made it clear I'm not the churchgoing kind.'

'Mrs. Colter seemed to think you'd fit in very well. And Mr. Colter seemed to have a certain admiration for you. Both of them did say you sometimes seemed to think folks were against you. They're not, of course, if you give them half a chance.'

'Thought you weren't going to preach, Reverend.'

Hurley laughed. 'All right—you got me that time. But, meanwhile, let me extend an invitation for something you might enjoy. We're having our opening bazaar in two weeks. It's to raise a little fund to get us started.'

There'll be everything from a cake sale to a turkey shoot. And dancing in the evening. We're making a platform out here for it. Hope you'll be with us.'

'Thanks, Reverend,' said Randall, 'but I expect I'll be too busy even for that.'

'Suit yourself,' said Hurley.

The two men locked eyes for a moment. At first Randall thought it was much like sparring by eye with Cap Mackey, but then he realized there was a difference. Hurley was looking at him as though he was sorry for him—Pat Colter had once looked at him like that. It infuriated him. He'd buck Cap Mackey any time, but he couldn't really hate the man deeply. He couldn't buck Hurley—not with a gun or a hard fist, at any rate—yet he found himself hating him now, wanting him crushed and out of the way.

He said, 'You tend to your business, Reverend; I'll tend to mine.' He kicked his horse off at a light trot and only a few minutes later he realized it hadn't been necessary.

Epifanio made no outward sign that he was pleased at the cash Randall had obtained, not even when Randall gave him a few dollars for pocket money. He grunted and said, '*Bueno, cuate*. Now we get to work.'

It occurred to Randall that Epifanio had asked for no pay, and this now embarrassed him a little. His father had always paid Epifanio, and in top-hand wages, too. He would have to talk to Epifanio about this some time; ask him to keep account of what Randall owed him, perhaps, so that some day, when Randall could afford it, Epifanio could collect. The idea of paying the old Mexican still seemed strange . . . didn't Epifanio call him *cuate*, which meant twin? That was even closer than calling a man *primo*, cousin. To be somebody's twin was about as close as you could get . . .

But these thoughts, too, were caught and swept away in the flood of hard work that came along. Now, with some of the preliminary chores out of the way, they could concentrate on building up the herd. There were more unbranded cattle roaming wild in that government range, the strip between his own land and John Colter's. They weren't the best cattle in the country, of course, for Colter and the other neighboring ranchers took care to pasture their finer stock where they could get at it more easily, but Randall wasn't worrying too much about quality as far as his first shipment was concerned. When he'd made that first shipment, showing that he could actually raise cattle, he'd be able to get a mortgage from the bank. With that money he'd buy some rich-blooded breeding stock and upgrade his herd. It would take time, but things would gather momentum as the months went by, and before long he'd be going ahead so fast that no one would ever stop him. As he'd told Hammond Grew, this was his business—his life—and he knew how it ought to be run.

Meanwhile, less than a week after he had returned with Grew's money, Grew called upon him to earn his first commission. He sent a young Mexican boy on a mule with a letter of instructions. Randall was to meet Grew and Mackey the following morning at the G-bar, a ranch northeast of Colter's, owned by one Fat Garner. Randall told Epifanio to take care of things and left in the dark of morning, cutting diagonally across his own land, the tip of the government strip, and then part of Colter's ownings. It had been light for some time when he reached the G-bar, but it was still early, and Grew would not arrive for an hour or so.

It was a gray day, with a dirty blanket of cloud spread all across the sky.

Fat Garner's house was a low adobe structure spread

out in a cottonwood grove by a small stream with a fringe of red willows along its banks. It had once been a hacienda belonging to some old Spanish *rico*. Randall supposed Grew had made the appointment with Garner, too, because, ordinarily in this season a working ranch-owner would be out on fall round-up with the men, either overnight with the wagons, or plenty early in the morning. And in these parts, where neighboring ranchers pitched in to help each other on round-up, chances were even greater that he wouldn't be home. As Randall approached, however, he was surprised to see a small crowd gathered in front of the house and a number of horses hitched nearby. He rode a little nearer, and then noticed that everyone was standing in a circle around a body stretched out on the ground.

One by one, men turned slowly to look at him as he came near. Fat Garner himself was one of the first, and he was easy to recognize by his name. Garner's belly hung so low that it concealed his belt, but the rest of him, though stocky, was not truly fat. Like any man who has lived in the saddle he had virtually no rump, and his legs came down from his topheavy body like thin, bent twigs. He was somewhere in his late forties or fifties, and his hat, shoved back, showed that he was bald on top. There were perhaps twelve people around the body on the ground. At the edge of the crowd Randall saw an older woman whom he took to be Mrs. Garner. She was slender and dark-eyed, and she, too, stared at Randall without much expression as he approached.

Randall pulled his horse to a slow halt. He nodded. 'What's happened here?'

'Mr. Randall, ain't it?' said Fat Garner. Like many husky men he had a squeaking, high-pitched voice. 'Seen you in town.'

'Yes, sir, my name's Randall. You're Mr. Garner.'

‘That’s right,’ Garner was looking at him warily, not sure why he visited. Garner had deep circles under his eyes and looked tired. He looked more than tired—he looked resigned.

Randall glanced at the hands standing about and noticed that at least three were from Colter’s Bar Broken C—at least he had seen them there before when he was convalescing. They’d been helping with Garner’s round-up, he supposed. ‘Somebody get hurt?’ Randall edged his horse forward and peered at the man on the ground; he couldn’t see him clearly yet, because several men were still in his line of vision.

‘Believe you know the lad,’ said Garner.

Randall flicked his horse’s reins over its head to keep him still, dismounted, and walked over to the body. The men made way for him. They stared at him silently as he passed them. One was Orrin Kigley, John Colter’s foreman, a tall, saturnine fellow with hollow cheeks and a beard so blue and heavy he never looked shaven, not even right after a shave. Randall nodded to him perfunctorily, but he didn’t nod back.

Randall came upon the body. It was a young man, slim and loose-jointed, and with peach-fuzz on his cheeks. There was a hole in his side and a great deal of blood. The flies were buzzing around the raw edges of the wound. Randall’s eyebrows rose and he said, ‘Bob Petersen!’

‘That’s right,’ said Fat Garner, right behind him. ‘We tried to get him here and send for Doc Levi, but he died ’fore we reached the house.’

‘How did it happen?’

There was a pause when Randall asked that question, and the men looked at each other. Garner finally said, ‘We had a stampede last night. Bob got hisself gored in it.’

Pretty quiet last night. Must have been spooky cattle.'

'That's the funny thing,' said Garner quietly. 'They wasn't spooked up at all.'

'What made 'em stampede?'

'Somebody started ridin' down on 'em and shootin' off guns.'

'Know who it was?'

'We *could* say it was rustlers. There's been some around lately. Only it wouldn't make much sense, would it, for a pack o' rustlers to come and stampede a herd so's even they couldn't get at it?'

Randall shrugged. 'I wouldn't know, Mr. Garner.'

'You sure you wouldn't, Mr. Randall?'

The full meaning of the question didn't hit Randall at first, because he was staring at young Bob Petersen's body and remembering the last time he'd seen him, young and alive, on the hot street in Tesqua, ready to face the gun-hand, Wilmer, knowing he probably didn't have a chance, but willing, just the same, to do what a man had to do if he was to stay a man. He had taken up Bob Petersen's fight for him that day, but for his own reasons, and not out of goodness. That was what he had told himself—and later, when he had started to feel good because he'd probably saved the boy's life, he had slapped down the thought. He didn't want to have to save anybody's life, and he didn't want anybody to have to save his. A man kept away from all kinds of hurt when he stayed on his own—

He turned to Garner and came out of his reverie. 'What makes you think I'd know something about your stampede, Mr. Garner?'

Garner's tired eyes stayed on him. 'Folks've been sayin' that you're working for Hammond Grew these days.'

'You think Grew started your stampede?'

Garner shrugged. 'Him or somebody workin' for him.'

'Somebody like me?'

'You're workin' for him, ain't you?'

Randall could feel the men all around him become taut. They were all armed. He didn't look at them directly, but he was aware of them from the corners of his eyes. He moved away with a couple of casual steps, so that he would be facing most of them. But he addressed Fat Garner again. 'Mr. Garner, I never yet had to go stampede somebody's cattle to make a few dollars.'

'You ain't workin' for Grew, then?'

'I'm representing Mr. Grew here this morning, yes. I wasn't around here last night.' Even as he said it, Randall knew how hollow it sounded.

Garner sighed. Randall saw that he glanced at his wife, the thin, quiet woman who stood at the edge of the circle—she would seem at the edge of things wherever she might be. Her own dark eyes held some of the same weariness that was in Garner's. Garner said, 'Just how you representin' Grew?' The flat way in which he asked the question showed that he already knew the answer.

'I believe Mr. Grew's made you an offer for your place. I'm here as his buyer.'

The men stirred at this and again traded glances with each other. Garner said wearily, 'Grew knows I'd just as soon sell. Getting too old to put up with all this. But he knows his price ain't fair. I can't see sellin' for less'n what the G-bar's worth.'

'Clarence,' said Mrs. Garner. For a moment Randall didn't know who Clarence was, until he saw her looking at her husband; he realized then it must be Fat Garner's given name. 'Clarence,' she said, and her voice was low and strong. She glanced once at the body in the dust. 'Let's get out of this country,' she said.

Garner frowned. He hooked his thumbs into his belt and scuffed some dust with the toe of his boot. He studied the little cloud he had made.

'Just a minute, Mr. Garner,' said Orrin Kigley. 'Scuse me, sir,' Kigley turned and looked at Randall. Colter's foreman's eyes were deep-set and they stirred like waking animals in two adjacent caves.

'Yes, Orrin?' said Garner, absent-mindedly.

'I know you been thinkin' about sellin' out,' said Kigley. 'Hard goin' here, and ain't nobody would blame you if you did. Anyway—'tain't my business what you do.'

'That's right, Kigley,' said Randall. 'It's not your business.'

Kigley was still looking directly at Randall. 'What I was fixin' to say, Mr. Garner, was I don't like somebody comin' here and pushin' you around. I never did like that kind o' thing much.'

Randall smiled. 'You taking over Mr. Garner's trouble, Kigley?'

'I'm sayin' my opinion, Randall. You want to take exception to it—that there's up to you.'

'Maybe I can give an opinion of my own, in that case,' said Randall. 'It seems to me this isn't very smart of you, Kigley. Not smart at all.'

'Maybe so,' said Kigley. 'None of us are very smart around here. Just honest, most of us—and maybe stubborn.'

'What're you fixing to do about this opinion of yours?' asked Randall.

'I was fixin' to ask you to get on your horse and ride back to where you come from and leave the rest of us alone.'

'Pushing for a showdown, Kigley?'

Randall saw, to his surprise, that Kigley was breathing

hard, taking great gulps of oxygen and trying not to show it, and the tips of his fingers were trembling like the antennæ of insects sensing danger. He did not know whether this came from suppressed hate, or from fear—perhaps a little of both, he thought. Kigley managed to keep his voice even, but it was clearly a struggle to do it.

‘Randall,’ he said, ‘somebody’s got to stand up to you, sometime. Maybe he won’t be as quick with that iron as you, but he’s got to show it can be done. It ought to be done. You got to be stood up to, Randall, wherever you go—and then one day somebody’s gonna be lucky, and you ain’t gonna be top dog no more.’

Randall shook his head. ‘Forget it, Kigley. I got no fight with you.’

‘It seems like you got a fight with all of us, Randall. Seems like you picked it.’

Colter’s foreman had him on a spot, and Randall didn’t know if the man had done it cleverly or blundered into it. He could not back down—his reputation would be shaken then. Every son from here to the courthouse would be challenging him if that happened. Yet he didn’t want to hurt Kigley. Grew had been right about that chink in his armor: he would have been better off if he’d been willing to shoot Kigley down and think no more of it. He wondered if Kigley would really make a play with his gun. Randall, of course, couldn’t afford to make the first play—they’d hang him for murder, if he did, the way folks felt about him now. But if Kigley drew first it would be self-defense, clear and simple, and according to the custom of the country, he’d probably never even stand trial for it; the only fuss might be a simple inquest he’d have to attend.

He remembered what his father had always taught him. ‘The only bluffs that always work, son,’ old Rufus

Randall had said, 'are them that ain't bluffs at all.' But he was not ready and willing to kill Orrin Kigley: that was his weakness in this moment. He was thinking of these things, and the silence had already been too long. Now he would have to say or do something, or the rest of them would know his weakness.

'It's your play, Kigley,' he said.

Everyone else, by unspoken agreement, and perhaps without conscious thought, had moved back and cleared a corridor, an arena, for the two men. They stood, several yards apart, facing each other. Randall, dark, medium-sized, with a touch of stockiness, but with the loose muscles of a cat . . . Orrin Kigley, tall, gloomy, slow-moving, his eyes strangely distant and sad.

Kigley shook his head. 'I ain't makin' a gun play.'less you make one, Randall. You take off your belt with me, and I'll be glad to make a play.'

Randall had difficulty in suppressing his sigh of relief so that others wouldn't see and understand it. Kigley himself had provided the way out of the dilemma. He wouldn't have to kill Kigley—just whip him. Then he looked at Kigley's tall, rawhide frame and realized that wouldn't be easy.

He brought his hands slowly to the buckle of his gun belt, and loosened it. He stooped to untie the rawhide which held the tip of his holster to his thigh. Kigley, following each movement, did the same, except that he, no quick-draw artist, used no string to tie his scabbard down. Both men let the heavy belts drop to the dust.

'All right, Kigley,' said Randall.

The foreman came toward him warily, almost lazily. His shoulders were slouched forward, and his hands were hooked at his sides. Randall kept his own hands lightly on his hips.

Mrs. Garner's voice, low and suppressed, suddenly broke the silence. 'Do you have to do it here? Do you have to do it where this boy's lyin' dead?'

'Let 'em do it, Ma,' said Fat Garner quietly.

Kigley suddenly charged Randall. Randall had expected the foreman to swing wide, but instead he shot his fists forward, one after the other, like slung shot, and his aim was true. Randall, ducking forward to get inside what he thought would be wild, sweeping blows, ran directly into the pistons of Kigley's punches.

His head was rocked, and there was dull pain, not fully blossomed yet, and he tasted the salty, butcher-shop taste of his own blood in his mouth. He tried to hook his own fists at Kigley's middle and missed. He was surprised to realize that he was staggering backward, that he was being driven back.

His daddy had taught him to fight with his hands. Or, more accurately, to fight without a weapon, for when you had to, you used more than your hands; you used your knees and your skull and your bootheels and your elbows and your teeth, and if there was something like a chair or an ax handle handy, you used that, too. His daddy had always tussled with him, ever since he was little more than half his daddy's size. His daddy had always encouraged little clashes in the corral and the bunkhouse among the hands, so that young Lige could watch and learn. He had taught him first that when you lock horns with another man you're going to get hurt, and the only way not to be afraid of that is to like it, to take pride in it. To feel the insane joy of taking more hurt than the other man, if necessary, and then staying with the fight until he's saturated with hurting and being hurt—until he has no more real will for it. If you can stay that long, his daddy had taught him, you've got the fight won.

But there was one thing, he realized suddenly, he'd never been taught. He'd never been taught to lose a fight. He never had lost a fight, he suddenly remembered. He wondered what a man was supposed to do then. He wondered this because it came to him that he was losing this one to Orrin Kigley.

He was on the ground. He was sitting in the dust, blinking up at a giant, swaying blur above him—Kigley, though he couldn't make out the man's features. He had been knocked here; knocked into the dust—

He struggled to push himself erect, and his muscles would not respond. He had no more strength than a baby.

Voices floated to his ears :

' Whip him, Orrin!'

' You got him, now. Orrin—you got him for fair!'

They were all for Kigley . . . Kigley had the will of every one of them behind each of his blows.

Randall shook his head, trying to clear away the thick mist before his eyes. He *had* to get up. If he didn't get up now the fight was truly lost—and it couldn't be that way, because he didn't know what to do when he lost.

It seemed many minutes since he had been sitting on the ground, dazed, but actually it couldn't have been more than a few seconds. He saw a great, gray mass coming toward him—a huge shape that seemed to float for a moment in mid-air above him. It was about to envelop him and crush him. Somehow, in a lightning passage of conscious thought, he realized that the shape was Kigley, and that Kigley was leaping upon him as he sprawled on the ground. *That was Kigley's mistake: if Kigley had waited for him to get up, he could have easily knocked him down again, but now Kigley was bringing the fight to him where he could handle it once more.*

Part of his strength flowed back into him in this moment. He had enough, somehow, to respond to his instinct to hurl himself to one side and avoid the big gray shape coming to smother him. The movement helped to clear his head. He saw Kigley strike the ground beside him, and he immediately brought his knee upward, viciously, into Kigley's side. Kigley tried to roll over, on top of him. Randall folded his legs, planted his boots in Kigley's middle, and kicked him away. Kigley rolled back. Randall was suddenly on top. He grabbed Kigley's ears and pounded the foreman's head on the ground. He heard him grunt softly and painfully each time his head struck. Kigley's body suddenly jerked like a snapped whip, and he threw Randall aside, loosening his hold.

Thus separated, both men took the chance to scramble to their feet once more. Randall looked at Kigley's wild dazed eyes and knew that the foreman's advantage was broken. They faced each other with reduced, but even, strength again. And this time Randall knew how Kigley would fight, and perhaps he could meet his style--

They fought. They cut and slashed at each other in a welter of hate, each, in these bloody moments, ready to kill if it could be done. Wanting to kill, barehanded. Wanting to feel the death of the other on his own skin; wanting to be close to the miracle of death, but not stung by it.

Their shirts were ripped to shreds, and their faces were covered with blood and grime. Some of the blood which had flowed and spread thin was already drying and turning dark, but there was fresh blood over it in places, bright red and glistening in the sun.

They stood toe-to-toe and struck at each other relentlessly in a heavy rhythm, and they were both tired now and their blows were losing force.

Suddenly Orrin Kigley dropped. Nothing foretold it;

no swaying or rolling of eyes; he merely fell forward, quite gently, and crumpled in a heap at Randall's feet. Randall stood over him breathing heavily and with agony, and trying so desperately to keep to himself the truth that in another moment he too would have dropped.

He turned his body in a partial circle so that he could cast his eyes in a slow azimuth over all the others. The effort made him rock uncertainly on his spread legs. His knees were beginning to tremble weakly, and he held them still with a desperate effort.

He said cockily, defiantly, 'Who's next?'

They stared at him quietly and with hate.

He breathed for a while until some more strength returned. At his feet Orrin Kigley stirred and moaned, and then Randall turned, walked slowly to where he'd dropped his gun belt, picked it up, and buckled it around his middle again. Some of the other men helped Kigley to his feet and walked him toward the pump to wash his wounds.

Fat Garner, standing alone with his slender, quiet-eyed wife said, 'Randall!'

Randall turned toward him. 'Yes?'

'This is the way it used to be, Randall. When this was wild country. We thought maybe we'd outgrew it, Randall, but I reckon we ain't. Mrs. Garner and myself, we don't want no part of this. Do we, Ma?'

Mrs. Garner nodded. 'Let's get out and leave this country to Mr. Randall and his kind.'

'You can tell Grew,' said Fat Garner wearily, 'I'll sell at his price.'

'All right. I'll tell him that.'

'And maybe you and him'll win all the way,' said Garner. 'But the day'll come when you won't be proud of it.'

Garner put his arm about his wife, and together they turned their backs upon Randall and walked back into the house. Randall went to his horse and mounted slowly and stiffly. The places where Kigley had cut and pummeled him were beginning to hurt like the very devil now.

TESQUA, AND the country surrounding it, woke up to Lige Randall as a sleepy man wakes to an intruder in the dark of morning—not quite aware, not quite believing it at first. When Fat Garner sold out and when people heard the story of Randall's visit and his fight with Orrin Kigley, they frowned a little, then shrugged, and told themselves that Fat was about ready to leave the country anyway. Within the next ten days there were two more sell-outs. One was a leathery old Mexican named Hernandez who had been trying to run sheep in the foothills; the other was a sod-buster named Peavey who had thought he could grow alfalfa and corn in the flat lands across the river from Tesqua. Lige Randall had called on both, had looked at them coldly and quietly, made Grew's offer for him, and they had signed the transfer deeds.

Randall now noticed that when he was in town people somehow managed not to get too near him on the street. Whenever he walked into the "Gran Quivira" there was always a sudden silence at first, and then when the noise returned, it was louder than before, and everyone sounded nervous. Even Epifanio, when Randall returned to the ranch, seemed inclined to talk with him less than before. Epifanio spent much time off by himself.

But Hammond Grew was more cordial than ever. The day after Peavey sold his land they sat in the real estate office and Grew opened a bottle of Kentucky whiskey.

He said he'd been saving it for an occasion, and this was one.

Randall drank and rolled a cigarette.

'Lige,' said Grew, holding his glass aloft, 'you've been just what the doctor ordered. Even that habit of yours—rolling cigarettes and not smoking them—I find exactly to my taste. Smoke always makes me cough.'

'Grew,' said Randall, frowning slightly, 'there's something you ought to understand, right off.'

'And what's that?'

'I'm not doing any of this to please you or hear all this nice praise you put out. I'm doing it for myself. I'm doing it because I'm bound to build something for myself in this country. I'll even do this dirty work to get started. I'd milk cows all winter if I had to—as long as I get that first herd grown and sold.'

'I never thought otherwise, my young friend,' said Grew. 'I'd suspect any man who pretended to do things for any other reason than to show himself a profit. I pay, and pay well, for everything I get—including a man's loyalty. That's why I can always be sure of someone like Cap Mackey, for instance.'

Randall shrugged. 'Cap Mackey don't mean anything to me.'

'I think he does,' Grew smiled. 'I mentioned him just now for a reason. You and Cap are natural rivals. You pride yourselves on your peculiar talents—and neither of you will rest, I know, until you find out who's really the better man. Now, I can understand this in a fellow like Cap Mackey. Do you see what I'm driving at?'

'Can't say I do.'

'Cap's a bully, and it so happens I have need of a bully right now. Otherwise, he couldn't earn himself a living wage—not even forty-and-found in some cattle outfit. He's a perfect example of the utter futility of war,

for he came into the war as a young man, and quickly rose to a captaincy—a position of some temporary importance—and did it, I suspect, through one of the accidents of war. I don't quite see him as a hero. At any rate, Randall, he never learned to do anything else but pose with his sash and sword. Ordinarily he would be a square peg in a round hole in peacetime. Luckily for him, he's found me. Therefore, I have his loyalty exactly where I want it.'

'As far as I'm concerned,' said Randall, 'you're welcome to it.'

Grew chuckled. 'You will stick to that façade of yours, won't you, Lige? I suppose you try to tell yourself that you're not even a part of the things Cap Mackey does for me.'

'I never asked you any questions about it, did I?'

'No. But I don't mind if you do. I don't think there ought to be any secrets between us, Lige—not because of any foolish notions of honor, but because I think it would be sensible and to our mutual advantage to work together. Let me put my cards on the table. Cap Mackey's not the only man in my employ. He has three hands—and you've probably seen them from time to time in the "Gran Quivira." They look like ordinary cowhands, and, in essence, that's what they are. They're out of the town most of the time—Mackey's set up a camp for them in the hills—so that when they come in, everyone assumes they work for somebody else and doesn't question their presence. I doubt if I have to explain further now that Mackey and these three men are behind most of the little difficulties the ranchers have been running into lately.'

'You sure like to talk, don't you?' said Randall.

'I suppose I do. But most things, in the long run, are accomplished by talk, aren't they? Accomplished or des-

troyed—as the case may be.’ Grew, still smiling, poured himself another drink. Randall saw his eyes begin to be bright again. He lifted the drink and was suddenly taken by one of his coughing fits. He put his glass down hastily, covered his mouth with a handkerchief which he took from his sleeve, and coughed himself out. His eyes were watery when he finished. He swallowed, regained composure. ‘I’m coming to the point of all this talk now,’ he said, ‘Cap Mackey is limited. He will never be anything else but a hired bully—and people like myself, who hire bullies, are not easy to find. But you’re a bit different, Lige, aren’t you?’

‘If you mean I’m different from Mackey, I expect I am.’

‘Lige, you want power, as I do. Allow me to say you’re going after it the wrong way.’

‘I don’t cut sign on all your fancy talk. I told you what I want. There’s no more to it than that.’

Grew shook his head. ‘You won’t make it, Lige, trying to build a cattle empire. Neither the time nor this place is right for it. But if you really want to be big. I suggest you cast your lot in with me.’

Randall smiled. ‘You mean I should go to work in this fenced-in office of yours?’

‘When you’re a little older you might find you’re glad to sit in an office. But that, for the moment, is beside the point. What I’m suggesting is that, in a small way, you come into partnership with me.’

‘The more you talk, the less I savvy,’ said Randall.

‘You could forget that ranch of yours. I’d accept it as capital. Throw its price into my kitty, and together we’ll buy up land and sell it when the time comes. You’ll make more money a lot more quickly that way than you will trying to raise cows.’

Randall laughed now. ‘All that talk—just to try to get

me to sell out again! Grew, when you get a notion, you sure stick to it.'

'I think it's a generous offer. That land of yours won't fetch nearly the price some of the other ranches will. It's close to bad land, and you know it.'

Randall, who had been sitting on the edge of the desk, straightened now. He spat the unlit cigarette out of the corner of his mouth. 'I'll tell you, Grew,' he said, 'when I'm the biggest rancher in these parts and when everybody knows that's what the name Randall stands for, I'm going to build the biggest and fanciest house around there. And I'm going to build it on that bad land, as you call it, right where my 'dobe shack stands today. Let me invite you to watch this happen, Mr. Grew.'

'All right, Lige,' said Grew. 'Don't say I didn't warn you. Meanwhile, let's drop the matter for the time being.'

'That suits me fine. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to my bad land.'

'I wish you wouldn't go just yet.'

'Why not?'

'There's a little gathering in town tonight. I really think you ought to be there.'

'What gathering?'

'Up at the church, Lige. Their opening bazaar. Surely you've heard of it.'

'Oh, yeah, I'd forgot.'

'Well, I can understand that it might strike you as a somewhat bland form of amusement. But we've made a rather good start with Garner, and the other two. I think it might be well to keep your name—and your reputation—in the foreground. The more they talk about you, and the more they fear you, the better it will be, you know. You won't have to do any more than put in a

quiet appearance at the bazaar. That should do the trick.'

Randall grinned. 'Afraid I'll be like a bug at a picnic there.'

'Exactly,' said Grew. 'That's the idea.'

'All right,' said Randall. 'I'll show up.'

He wondered why he had said it so quickly and willingly. It was as if the answer just came, without his thinking about it beforehand. And he was surprised to find himself cottoning to the idea as he mounted outside of Grew's office and walked his horse along the main street. After he thought it all over for a few minutes, he came up with an answer that satisfied him: he was going to the bazaar just to see what damned fools people could make of themselves.

Later, as he approached the new church, he heard the sound of a crowd and of music. His ear picked out a guitar, several fiddles, and a mouth harp. Candles were hung all about the church plaza, lighting the area. There were parked wagons and hitched horses and people milling about the church yard and the nearby cottonwood grove. A large cloth sign was stretched across the gateway, and it said: **OPENING BAZAAR—WELCOME!**

In the center of the church's courtyard a large wooden platform had been erected, and here twelve dancers had formed three squares and were skipping away in intricate patterns to a piece Randall recognized dimly as something called 'Raccoon Reel'. There were a number of small wooden booths with canvas tops scattered about the dance platform, and in these women were selling cakes, plates of barbecue, chili verde, tamales iced sarsaparilla, and coffee. At one booth some cowboys were trying to lasso dolls with tiny lariats too soft to curl into a real loop. Everybody was laughing and grinning—he'd

never seen so much good spirit all in one place at one time like this before.

He halted his horse at the edge of things and watched quietly for a while. An unexpected feeling welled up within him. Suddenly, he wanted to be with these folks—wanted to be part of all that warmth and laughter—and he felt it as a kind of thirst. It startled him, then made him angry.

He found himself searching with his eyes in the crowd, and at first he wasn't sure why, but in a moment he realized he was looking for Pat Colter. That made him angry all over again.

A deep, clear voice behind him suddenly said, 'Hello, there! Good evening!'

His horse shied a little. He brought it back under control, adding a soft cussword to his efforts, then swung it in a half circle so that he faced the speaker.

It was the Reverend Tod Hurley, with that butter-milk grin of his turned on full. He had his preacher's clothes on tonight—a dark gray suit and a black string tie. But it still didn't make him look much like a preacher.

'Glad you could come,' said Hurley. 'Just hitch your horse over there somewhere and join us.'

Randall's pride demanded that he make at least a token objection and he said, 'I wasn't really fixing to join the party. Just happened to be passing by.'

'Oh, come now, Mr. Randall,' said Hurley, 'we want everybody to join in. We'll need you for the turkey shoot.'

'Why would you be needing me for a turkey shoot?'

'I've heard you're quite a good shot, Mr. Randall.'

'Funny you should hear that. I don't believe I've done much shooting around here.'

'All the more reason for you to demonstrate your

abilities. Unless, of course, you're afraid of risking your reputation. After all, I suppose we'll have some pretty good marksmen shooting at that turkey tonight.'

Randall had to smile. 'Reverend, you're trying to talk me into it.'

'Of course I am,' said Hurley. 'Come on, now—get down and meet your neighbors for a change. You might even find you like some of them.'

Randall held his smile, looked at Hurley evenly for a moment, and was startled at the thought that maybe he even liked this young man with the square jaw and the buttermilk smile. He didn't quite believe it when he heard himself say, 'All right, Reverend. I might as well have that turkey as the next fellow.'

At that, it did surprise him to see all the smiles and nods that came his way as Tod Hurley led him through the church courtyard, showing him how the bazaar was laid out. The only thing he could figure was that most of the people who smiled at him either didn't know or didn't recognize him, and that, in fact, was about the size of it. Hurley took him on a wide circle of the new church building. In the rear, tables had been set out for a picnic supper, and at one point he thought he saw Pat Colter helping to dish food out of an array of bowls and buckets at a large table at one end. Before he could get a good look, Hurley steered him on again.

They moved through a grove of apple trees to a large pasture on the other side of the church. Men here were working on a kind of low stall and Hurley explained that this was in preparation for the turkey shoot. The men were ranchers and had volunteered for this duty. Among them Randall recognized John Colter.

The men were working slowly and passing a stone jug around among themselves, beaming with great satisfaction as they drew upon it in turn, but when Hurley came

into sight one of them stashed it hastily behind the small target pen they were building.

'Why, good evenin', Mr. Hurley,' said Colter, turning to face the preacher. He wiped some moisture from the scraggly lower edge of his gray mustache. He glanced at Randall coldly.

'Hello, Mr. Colter,' said Hurley. He nodded to a red-faced rancher with a white mustache. 'Evening, Judge.' He smiled at Randall. 'Mr. Musselman here doesn't want to be called Judge, but I never can help it. He looks just like one.' He turned to another, smaller man with dark skin and eyes and said, 'Good evening, Mr. Antonini.' And he went full circle, calling out everybody's name. When that was finished, he put his hand on Randall's arm and said, 'I believe all you gentlemen know Lige Randall. Maybe he can help you with your building here. And—er—after I leave, with your other activities.' He glanced meaningfully to where the jug was not too successfully hidden.

'I don't believe we need no help, Mr. Hurley,' said John Colter. No one looked at Randall.

'I can see they don't need help, Reverend,' said Randall. 'Which makes 'em the same as me. Think I'll stroll on back to the bazaar now, if you don't mind.'

'I'll go with you,' said Hurley. He waved to the others. 'Keep up the good work, gentlemen.'

Randall moved off, feeling the stares of the ranchers in the back of his neck. He said to Hurley, 'Shouldn't have done that, Reverend. They don't want me, and I don't want them.'

'I'm sorry, Lige,' said Hurley. 'It was a mistake on my part. Perhaps I meddle too much—it's something we preachers have to be careful of, because it's so easy for us to do. But I hoped, maybe, if everything was done casually, I might bring you all together again.'

‘Why?’ asked Randall.

‘Why what?’

‘Why should you care how they feel about me, and me about them?’

Hurley smiled. ‘Lige, I once said I wouldn’t preach to you, so I hesitate to mention the importance of brotherhood among all men, and my dedication to that ideal. Surely you understand it. It’s the key to so many things—brotherhood.’

‘Reverend,’ said Randall, ‘I wouldn’t know. I never had any brothers.’

They were standing again at the broad dance platform, and now, momentarily, the musicians were resting. Men and women were beginning to form two squares, and the dance-caller, a wall-eyed old fellow with a rabbit-tail beard and an old blue forage hat from the Mexican War, was trying to get the dancers into their proper spots with a series of piping directions and a great many gestures.

Randall saw Pat Colter among the dancers. She was looking away from him. He saw her profile and it was to him like the carved white head of a woman on a pink cameo brooch. His mother had worn such a brooch, and though he remembered little of her, he suddenly remembered the trinket quite clearly . . .

And Pat Colter stood with her chin proud and her shoulders square there among the dancers; she looked as fresh as rain against the lantern-speckled night, and her bosom moved gently with her breathing.

‘Miss Colter’s very pretty, isn’t she?’ Hurley’s voice, when he kept it quiet, was like the deepest tones of an organ.

‘Right, pretty,’ agreed Randall, without taking his eyes from Pat.

The old square dance caller suddenly held up his arms

and looked out over the crowd. His white tuft of beard bobbed as he spoke. 'Folks—we got just fifteen dancers here! We need one more he-male to make two squares.'

There was a murmuring response and several young men grinned and elbowed each other, trying to pretend they didn't want to mount the platform, but unmistakably wanting to very much.

'Go on,' Randall said to Tod Hurley. 'There's your chance to dance with her.'

Hurley smiled. 'I'd like to very much, but I'm afraid some of our good congregation might not think it exactly in keeping with the dignity of my position.'

'Then,' said Randall, 'I reckon I'll have to do it myself.'

'Randall—' said Hurley sharply.

'Yes?'

'I wouldn't, if I were you.'

"Wouldn't you, now?"

'Not if I were you.'

Randall faced Hurley and grinned at him without humor. 'Reverend,' he said, 'if you were me you sure as shooting would. What's the matter—you jealous?'

'No, I'm not, oddly enough,' said Hurley. 'A jealous man is one who secretly thinks he hasn't got as much to offer as the other fellow. Nevertheless I'm asking you not to go up there.'

Hurley, as he spoke, moved himself so that he stood between Randall and the platform. And for some reason—perhaps because of the carrying power of the preacher's voice—a number of people had suddenly turned to look at Hurley and Randall. Some of them had stopped talking so that they could hear better. Randall, in the next instant, noticed this or perhaps sensed it, and frowned.

‘Reverend,’ said Randall, “you might have some people buffaloed, so you can tell ’em what to do, but I’m not one of them.’

‘You’ll only cause difficulty, Randall.’

‘I don’t believe I will. I never did have trouble following steps.’

‘You don’t have to make a joke of it. You know what I mean.’

‘Say it plain, Reverend. Let’s hear what you mean.’

‘Pat’s father won’t like it with you up there. He might want to start some trouble over it. I don’t want to see any trouble like that, Randall.’

‘Afraid of trouble, Reverend? Is that why you got to be a preacher in the first place—so’s you can duck it?’

Randall saw Hurley stiffen, saw his eyes narrow slightly and wanted to laugh because he’d prodded that much out of him. He knew that all the others were staring at them now, and that they, too, were wondering just how far the new preacher would stand up to him.

‘Randall.’ Tod Hurley said, his voice cold and even now, ‘it’s against all I believe to fight you in the way you fight, and I won’t do it. But understand this, Lige Randall, and understand it well. I’m not afraid of you, or of anything you can do.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I wish I could do something for you, Lige Randall. I’m sorry for you.’

The words struck Randall like a blow. He could feel the anger pour into his bloodstream and make him numb. He spoke as though his voice was separate from himself and beyond the control of his own mind. He didn’t really mean to say what he said, but it came out anyway. ‘If you’re not afraid of me, make a play,’ he said. ‘Back up that fine talk of yours, Reverend—go ahead, make a play.’

There was a shocked silence all about, and even

Randall, in his angry daze, felt it and understood it.

Hurley smiled at him, and Randall saw that he *was* unafraid, and this intensified his anger so that it all but crazed him.

Suddenly he saw that Pat Colter had walked swiftly to the edge of the platform. He heard her voice, clear and strong, cleaving the silence. 'Mr. Randall,' she said, 'won't you help us out by joining us?'

He stared into her eyes. There was no real invitation there—only defiance. Her words were thinnest silk, not at all concealing what she really meant to say. *You're not of the slightest importance to me, Lige Randall*, she was saying, *I can dance with you—or more—and it won't even budge my heart in the slightest.*

Randall looked at Hurley again. 'The lady's asking me to dance,' he said. 'Still want to stop me?'

'I never meant to stop you,' said Hurley. 'I was only trying to help you stop yourself.' With that, he stood aside.

Randall mounted the platform, feeling stiff and conspicuous. There was still silence, and everyone was still staring at him.

The dance-caller abruptly clapped his hands and chanted:

*Gentlemen stand to yore lady, air—
Mind yore manners and form yore squares!*

The music leaped into being like a jackrabbit leaving the silence of a bush.

*Oh—UP the canyon and up the crick,
Join yore hands and make it slick!
Now, HON—or yore partners, sides address,
And all start out with a circle left!*

The fiddles sang and the drums pulsed and the guitar chopped out the rhythm. It became a racing beat in Randall's ears. He held Pat Colter's hand in the alle-mande and found it cool. He put his arm about her shoulders in the promenade and felt them tremble slightly. He broke away in the do-si-do, then brushed against her lightly as she passed again.

*Oh TAP yore heel and save yore toe,
Chicken in the breadpan, scratchin' dough!
Then, MEET yore gal in calico,
And sashay back along the row!*

Randall danced as he rode, as he roped, as he drew and fired a pistol—balanced lightly, and without thought for his movements. It all came easily to him, and it seemed to him this night he was inexhaustible. He was of Randall blood; he was heir to the Randall right, and now it was his own; he was king of all he could see, and you could see for uncounted miles in this country. He burned brightly with the feeling.

And somehow the feeling communicated itself to Pat Colter. Suddenly she was matching his turnings and his steps as though the same set of nerves controlled each of their bodies. Suddenly she was laughing and throwing her head back so that her hair swirled. Her eyes shone in the lantern light . . .

The dance was over. Pat Colter backed away from Randall and stared at him for a moment, an afterglow of excitement in her eyes, and as he watched, it seemed to die. The other couples were leaving the platform hastily. Randall supposed John Colter was still busy elsewhere—at least, he hadn't appeared to interfere. He didn't care whether he did or not. He stared at Pat

Colter, felt as though his skin might be giving off sparks, and had all he could do to remember the time of evening or his name.

Suddenly she turned and walked swiftly away, and that was the last he saw of Pat Colter that evening.

ten

N O O N E could figure out the weather. Here it was almost to the gate of winter, and the sky was suddenly a warm-weather sky again—warm and heavy and queerly sticky at times. It was not deep and clear, the way a sky in this country ought to be. It was thick and yellow toward the horizon.

John Colter sat for a moment and smoked his first pipe of the day after breakfast. Pat and Ma Colter cleared the dishes from the table. Ma, with her round, dimpled face, looked at her husband and smiled as she went by.

‘Pa, I just bet I know why you’re running short-handed this season.’

‘You know why, Maria. To hang on to our money till that snortin’ fool railroad gets here—if it ever docs.’

She shook her head, stopped, leaned over, and kissed him on the forehead. ‘You’re doing it so you can be lazy like this every morning.’

Colter laughed and patted her cheek, and then she broke away and bustled into the kitchen with her load of dishes. His pipe went out; he lit it and chuckled to himself briefly. Then he frowned. He was still frowning when she came back into the room.

‘I declare, your face is clouded up these days,’ she said.

‘Well—there’s lots to think about.’

‘Maybe just thinking’s not so good. Why don’t you talk it out?’

‘It’s business. Not for a woman’s head.’

‘John Colter, I been taking care of you these many years—and I’d just like to know what’s bigger or more tangled-up to take care of.’

He looked at her, and his smile returned. ‘That’s right, Maria. You been settin’ me straight right from the start.’

‘Right from the start. You remember what kind of young fellow you used to be, don’t you?’

‘I remember.’ He rose suddenly, crossed the room to his roll-top desk and threw open the shutter-like covering. He fumbled for a moment in a pigeonhole, took out a rolled piece of paper, and spread it flat. It was yellowed at the edges. Ma Colter came and looked at it over his shoulder. Any time I start to forget I can look at this again.’

The paper had been a small poster. It said:

W A N T E D

For Flight to Avoid Lawful Prosecution For:

D E A D L Y A S S A U L T

John Adams Colter

6 feet, 4 inches tall, slender, dark hair.

WARNING: IS VERY HANDY WITH GUN
AND ALWAYS TOTES ONE

‘I wish you’d throw that thing away,’ said Ma Colter, sighing. ‘I wish you’d burn it.’

Colter grinned, rolled the paper and replaced it in the pigeonhole ‘I just keep it to remind me once in a while. I like to remember I was a real curly wolf ‘fore you came along and civilized me.’

‘You *were* a curly wolf, all right, John Colter.’

‘If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t of give myself up and got cleared of them charges.’

‘And you would have gone on gun-fighting, till you killed somebody or somebody killed you.’

Colter nodded. ‘I know that, Ma. I ain’t never said

different. I was lucky to stop packin' iron when I did. I was getting too good with it—I was gettin' too all-fired anxious to use it.' Then he chuckled again and for an instant seemed to look into the distance. 'I expect I could still get off a pretty fast draw if I had to.'

'Don't you dare!' said Ma Colter.

He put his arm around her and said, 'Don't worry, Maria. I'd have to be pushed real hard 'fore I'd even think of it.'

'No, there! You don't have to be soft-soapin' me, John Colter!' said Ma, taking his arm from her waist and straightening her apron. He could, however, see the pleasure in her eyes. She stepped back to the table and busied herself with the last few dishes. 'Anyways,' she said, 'I always steered you straight, and I reckon you can talk to me about your business troubles—can't you?'

'No real trouble,' said Colter, sitting again. 'I was just wonderin' if I'd done right not to brand that bunch in Cat Canyon.'

'Heavens to Betsy—are you still worrying about *that*?'

'Well, there's a good two hundred head. They're my blooded stock. Not the scrub stuff like we put on the gov'ment land. Wouldn't be able to upgrade the rest o' the stock without 'em.'

'Pa, will you stop frettin' about it? You been frettin' about it all year. The way you're doin' is right. In fact, it's the only way we can send Pat east for more schoolin' next year.'

He looked up sharply. 'You really think she needs to go east again?'

Now it was Maria Colter's turn to frown. She lowered her voice, glanced at the kitchen, where Pat was, then said, 'Sometimes, Pa, I don't know *what* to think about that child.'

In the kitchen Pat had already begun to wash the

dishes. She heard the voices of her mother and father in the next room, but she could make out no words. She wasn't listening very closely anyway. She was trying to keep down the strange restlessness that was rising within her again. She was trying, somehow, to make herself numb in her heart, so that she wouldn't have to face this long day, which, she knew, would be like all her other days here. It wasn't that there was too much work—in fact she would have welcomed a little more drudgery to keep her mind from wandering—it was just that there was no excitement of any kind. She wanted to hear music and laughter; she wanted to see things move and sparkle.

Like several nights' ago—like the night of the church bazaar, she thought. She began to breathe more quickly, thinking about it.

Her mother came into the kitchen.

'Now, for heaven's sake, child,' she said, 'you don't have to wash those dishes!'

'I want to, Mama.'

Ma Colter was not one to argue with; she wrestled the dish rag from her daughter and nudged her away from the tin sink with her ample hips. 'You dry!' she commanded and handed her a towel.

Ma washed busily, and Pat dried for a few moments. Ma stole glances at her daughter. Finally she said, 'Tod Hurley looked mighty handsome at the bazaar, didn't he?'

'He always looks handsome,' said Pat.

Ma lifted her eyebrows and stopped moving her hands in the water. 'Child, you say that as though . . . well, like you don't care about it.'

'I think Tod Hurley's a fine young man, mama. I like him very much.'

'Well, of course. That's the way to talk.'

‘But I don’t love him, mama.’

‘Love him? Did I say anything about loving him?’

‘You’d like to see me married to him, wouldn’t you?’

‘Well, I declare, I never said anything of the sort!’

She washed a plate vigorously for a moment. ‘Of course I always *did* think you and him was suited.’

‘Ma, I don’t want to talk about it.’

Ma Colter frowned and sighed and cleared her throat and then said, ‘Patricia, I never did talk to you much about this kind of thing, but I expect it’s time you knew something about love.’

‘Ma, if you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk at all.’

‘Just the same, you listen a minute. You’ve been reading these novels from back east, where a woman sees a man the first time and just plumb falls in love with him. Pat, it ain’t like that. It ain’t like that, at all. A woman gets her a good man, and if he *is* a good man, it don’t take her long to fall in love with him. You believe me, Patricia, the best part of love comes after you’re married.’

Pat smiled dryly. ‘Was it that way with you and Daddy?’

‘No—I was young, and my head was full o’ cotton, just like yours. I fell in love with your pa the fust time I saw him walking down the street. He wasn’t much of a catch in those days, I can tell you that. But there was a seed of goodness in him, Patricia, and maybe in my heart I knew it.’

‘Then perhaps that’s how you fall in love with a man the first time you see him. Perhaps you *do* know.’

‘Patricia,’ said Ma Colter in a tone of voice on the edge of despair, ‘you’re mixing my words all up! If I’d figured you’d learn how to do this, I never would have sent you to that school!’

Pat laughed, kissed her mother's cheek, and said, 'Mama, don't worry about me. Please—just don't worry.'

In mid-morning she left the house, as she did nearly every day, saddled her own horse, and rode aimlessly over the lonely stretches of her father's property. She was especially restless today, and she told herself it was because of the strangeness of the unseasonably warm weather.

Randall and Epifanio had been riding since shortly after dawn, and now they halted at the spring in the middle of the government strip, near where Randall had been thrown from his horse, and where Pat Colter had first discovered him.

The spring had been turned into a water hole. Colter's hands from the Bar Broken C had built a low dam just below it, and now the scrub cattle in the strip were never very far from this pond; Randall could see most of them grazing as he and Epifanio sat and ate their lunch. Those he saw were branded. Every maverick he'd been able to find was now part of his own herd.

He ate without enthusiasm. Epifanio had made *burritos*—thick, doughy tortillas folded around mashed beans—and ordinarily he would have wolfed these down with pleasure, but today he couldn't seem to put his mind or his senses to anything. He was still not sure why he had decided that he and Epifanio would ride this morning. He had said they would hunt for more unbranded cattle, but even as he'd said it, he'd known that wasn't the real question. As a matter of fact he wasn't sure there was much reason, beyond restlessness and the strange warmth of the day.

'It's a funny thing about old man Colter,' he said finally, staring at the skyline along the sand hills.

‘What is funny, *cuate*?’

‘The way he figures he’ll be eating high off the hog when the railroad gets here.’

‘Let him eat, no? We eat, too. Everybody eats. Only you don’t eat your *burrito*.’

Randall went on talking as though he hadn’t heard. ‘The more I think about it, the more I believe there’s sign somewhere we haven’t cut vet. Remember, I was at Colter’s place some considerable time when I was stove in. I got a pretty good idea what was going on. I saw his riders come and go, heard ’em talk, and even passed the time of day with some.’

‘What are you trying to say, *cuate*?’

Randall was frowning thoughtfully. ‘Colter must keep a pretty big herd.’

‘Si. He has a big outfit. What is the difference?’

‘The difference is this. He don’t carry nearly enough hands for the herd he’s got. I couldn’t tell you exact, of course, but I’d guess close to half his herd never did get branded. Just not enough hands to do it.’

‘That is his business, no?’

‘I’d sure give my saddle to know where it is. The rest of it.’

‘The rest of what, *cuate*?’

‘The rest of the herd he didn’t brand. Not this scrub stuff he lets run loose in the strip here. His good graded stuff. We could sure do a lot for our herd with it.’

‘If it is on his land, *cuate*, you can do nothing.’

‘I’m not so sure about that.’

Epifanio stared at Randall for a moment. ‘You wouldn’t take the cattle from Senor Colter’s land? You wouldn’t do this?’

‘Any law against it?’

‘Not the law, *cuate*. What a man’s heart must tell him.’

My heart don't tell me a damned thing, Epi. Maybe we better start riding on Colter's land. Maybe we better have a look.'

Epifanio frowned. 'I don't like this way, *cuate*.'

'You'll like it if we find some fat stock for the taking.'

'Listen, *cuate*—I want to ask the question.'

'What?'

'Maybe we find some good cows, yes? Maybe after we are rich. But we don't going have any friends, *cuate*. What good is it, we are rich?'

'I expect it's even better without friends. Nobody to take it away from you.'

Epifanio shook his head and sighed. 'You are not lonely, *cuate*?'

'Me? Lonely? Why should I be?'

'No one talks to you now. When you go in the town, everybody, he turns away.'

'That suits me, first rate. Don't tell me *you're* getting lonesome all of a sudden.'

Epifanio sucked loudly at one of his eye-teeth with his tongue for a moment. 'I was thinking, you know,' he said.

'Thinking what?'

'Maybe I like to take a woman. That oldest daughter of old man Garcia—'

'Plenty o' time for that—after. Right now, suppose we saddle up and get riding.'

'On Colter's land?'

'Well, we're not going to find any mavericks any place else—that's for sure.'

All that afternoon they rode, Randall in the lead, Epifanio, pouting and surly, lagging some distance behind. Randall peered into canyons and draws as they passed them. The land began to roll, and the scrub became thicker as they neared the mountains.

Randall kept telling himself—angrily—that he was *not* lonely. He never would be—by God!

Late in the afternoon Epifanio moved up alongside. 'Maybe we better go back now, eh, *cuate*?'

'Not dark yet. Let's keep looking.'

'I don't like this way. I don't know why I stay with you, *cuate*.'

Randall looked at him sharply. 'You don't have to.'

'I don't know. Maybe it is necessary. Maybe I am with you so long, I can't stop now. This is our Mixecan way, no? We don't change so easy. I cannot explain in English what is this feeling I want to say.'

'Say it in Spanish.'

'No, *cuate*—I think maybe you don't understand in any language.'

They came to a canyon with a narrow mouth, entered, and saw it widened considerably on the inside. There were low hills covered with evergreens and rich, yellow grass. Suddenly Randall saw brown shapes moving among the trees. 'Cattle here,' he said. He squinted at some of the nearer animals. 'No brands. Slick ears, too.'

Epifanio scowled and said nothing. They rode forward and came to a depression in the ground where the soil had been chopped by hundreds of pawing hoofs and was now dry and caked over. Randall studied this for a while, cast his glance all around the canyon again, then narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and said, 'Water hole dried up, looks like. I don't expect they'll stay in this canyon long.'

It was difficult to tell how many cattle were pastured here, but there must have been quite a few because the brown shapes could be seen wherever they looked. Those near them were staring at them in the curious way of range cattle, and one or two of the bulls were pawing the earth with a touch of defiance.

‘These critters’d upgrade our herd just fine,’ said Randall. He nodded several times. ‘Just fine.’

‘Listen, *cuate*, we cannot take them back. We are just two men, no? Maybe pretty good men, but not enough for all these cows.’

Randall rolled a cigarette and kept staring all about. ‘With a little help we could get ’em back. You could make our branding pen a little bigger, so’s it would hold maybe a hundred head, maybe a few more. Look at ’em, Epi. They’re thirsty and stirred up. Wouldn’t take much to get ’em moving. We’d drive ’em to the water hole in the government land, let ’em drink, and then prod ’em on down to our place. Start early enough, and we could do it in a day.’

‘Where you going to get this help? You going to ask Senor Colter to help you steal his own cows?’

‘Steal? Why, Epi, I’m surprised at you. There’s not a mark on them cows. They belong to whoever finds ’em.’

‘They are on the land of Senor Colter.’

‘So they are. Anybody’s guess where they drifted from.’

Epifanio sighed helplessly, and Randall grinned at him. Epifanio rubbed his nose in a troubled gesture and then spat to one side. ‘Listen, *cuate*. One time, just listen to me. You are doing this wrong. You are beginning just like your father.’

‘That’s right,’ said Randall, nodding. ‘And before it’s over, I’ll build something as big as he did.’

‘Si. He was a big man, *cuate*. But he was never a happy man. Never. I tell you this because I know.’

‘You know, do you?’ Randall was half-smiling, out of habit, to show, as usual, that Epifanio’s remonstrations amused him, but there was also a tight edge of annoyance to his smile, now.

'I was with your father a long time,' said Mexican. 'Si. One very damn' long time. You know why I was with him this long time?'

'Because he was the biggest man around, I reckon.'

'No.' Epifanio shook his head. 'I did not care if he was big or little. This was nothing to me. But one time, when I was a young man, when your father was a young man, this was the time we meet. Maybe you never hear this story.'

The old Mexican looked into the past, and his eyes glittered. He seemed unaware of Randall's presence now that he narrated the tale. He was just a youth when this happened—'I don't know how old, but not yet old enough to want a *senorita*'—and a band of Comanches had swooped down on the jacal where he lived with his parents and eight brothers and sisters and had killed everyone but himself. He had hidden in the brush, and they hadn't found him until after their bloodlust had simmered down a bit. They had carried him off as a slave. He had escaped on the way to their camp, stealing a horse, and when they'd discovered his absence, they'd pursued him. A few hours later, with the horse lathered and ready to drop, and the Comanches close behind, Epifanio had come across a lone rider on the dry prairie. It was young Rufus Randall, just coming into the brush country from the Louisiana border. He had run away from home, and he had a rope and a six-shooter, and with that he was going to make his fortune somehow in this new world. The older Randall used his six-shooter for the first time that day to drive off the Comanches, who had only lances and bows and arrows. They gave up after he killed two of them. Rufus put Epifanio on the back of his own horse, and they had stayed together after that.

'After that I stay with your father,' said Epifanio.

‘Many years. I see this sickness take him. When he wants land and cows and wants to be rich. More, and more—more all the time. *Si*. I know this is like sickness in the heart. But I stay with him because he is the one who gives me my life that time. And all these years I know he is not a happy man. Now you are going the same way. This is wrong, *cuate*.’

‘Epi, suppose you let me decide what’s right and wrong.’ Randall was tight-lipped. ‘Now let’s get back and fix that branding pen. In forty-eight hours we’re going to have this herd, and our troubles are going to be over.’

‘I think maybe,’ said Epifanio, ‘the real trouble is going to begin.’

eleven

IT WAS hard work, enlarging the branding corral, and Randall reveled in it. All the next day he and Epifanio, stripped to the waist, worked in the sun and glistened with sweat. Epifanio had already gathered saplings from the mountains, and while these weren't yet seasoned, they used them anyway, lashing the joints with rawhide. Randall dug the post-holes with an energy close to fury, until Epifanio straightened, wiped the sheet moisture from his own brow, and shook his head at Randall in mild disbelief and admiration.

Once he stopped and said, 'Hey, *cuate*. It is not good to work without smiling.'

'You smile, then,' said Randall. 'I'm gettin' this pen built.'

Late in the day Randall ate a hasty supper of bacon and frijoles, saddled his gray horse, and set out for Tesqua. He was not tired; indeed, he tingled with excitement and felt limitless in his strength. He kept the horse at a steady, mile-eating jog: the pace that would get him there the quickest and at the same time tire the animal least. Just before topping the hill outside of the town he veered north and headed for Hammond Grew's house, hoping he'd find him there.

Grew had bought an old hacienda, complete with the patio and grilled windows, that recalled a more leisurely day in this part of New Mexico. He lived here with a small staff of Mexican servants, and he had managed to rebuild and repair the old ruin until it was close to

being the fanciest house in the region. Flowering vines were beginning to cover the walls of the house and a carefully landscaped cactus garden was sprouting around the entrance to the patio.

Randall entered the gateway a short distance from the house and rang an old iron bell on a spring as he passed. Dogs began to bark, and several black-and-white runty shepherds—the fine work-dogs of this country—ran out to greet him. By the time he reached the house, two *pelados* in huge straw sombreros were there to take his reins and lead his horse to the corral to rest, unsaddled.

‘It will be well,’ said Randall in his perfect Spanish, ‘that you remove his saddle blanket to dry and walk him first, that he does not become cool too quickly.’

They stared for a second in surprise as they heard this, then recovered their wits, removed their hats, nodded many times and said, ‘*Si, Señor! Pero que si!*’

Randall stalked across the stone paving of the patio to the main entrance of the house. The lights were on inside, bright kerosene lamps which Grew burned with a profligate hand, and Hammond Grew himself was at the door to greet Randall. Grew held a tulip-shaped glass in his hand.

‘Well—Randall! Nice to see you! Why haven’t you come around before this? Come in, come in—I’ve opened a bottle of choice brandy!’

Randall nodded and muttered a greeting, and Grew took him by the arm and led him into the house. The little man seemed curiously elated this evening, and his eyes were even brighter than Randall remembered. Then Randall noticed that Grew walked carefully, and with an odd, bantain dignity—and realized that he was tipsy and was doing this to keep from staggering.

‘Dora!’ called Grew, as they entered the *sala*. ‘We

have company! Not often we have company, is it? See who's here'

Randall saw Dora Morena at an upright piano at the far end of the room. Her dark eyes, olive skin, and black hair, drawn tightly back from a center part, were exceptionally beautiful in the soft light of the room. She wore a dress of black silk the bodice of which raised and accentuated her bosom.

'Evening, ma'am,' said Randall, nodding to her.

'Thank God *somebody* came. I was getting bored stiff,' said Dora Morena. Her voice was a little thick. She turned, not too steadily on the piano bench toward a small table nearby, took a bottle and a tumbler from it, poured herself an ample drink of whiskey and downed it in a gulp.

'You'll have to forgive Dora,' said Grew, 'she's celebrating her birthday. She won't say which one, of course, and, in honor of the occasion, I've been kind enough not to press the matter.' He chuckled, pleased with himself, and motioned Randall to a chair. 'We asked a few people to join us this evening, but unfortunately they haven't appeared. I warned Dora this might happen, but she wouldn't listen and seemed to think she's already attained the respectability to which she aspires.'

'Go to hell, Hammond!' said Dora. '*Go to hell!*'

He laughed, slapped Randall lightly on the arm, and said, 'Let me get you a drink.'

Randall sat and looked around the room. The furniture was ornate and of good quality, probably shipped in from the east at no small expense. But somehow it looked too new, too unused—there was no warmth and, indeed, a strange sense of loneliness in this room.

His gaze went to Dora Morena again, and he saw that she was still sitting on the piano bench and staring at him as though flinging a dare of some sort in his face.

He cleared his throat, looked in another direction, and frowned until Grew brought his drink.

Grew took a chair across from Randall. He waved imperiously at Dora. 'Play, my dear. Play one of those sad songs of yours.'

'I will not,' said Dora.

The little man looked at Randall, grinned, and spread his hands. 'She is being independent this evening. This once, I am indulging her. Actually, she doesn't play very well. She merely strikes chords in accompaniment to her singing. Are you familiar with piano music, Randall? Her music is not—how shall we say it?—not *pianistic*. I think her instrument would be the guitar. I must ask her sometime if she plays it.'

'Hammond Grew,' said Dora, spitting his name out as though it were acid to the taste, 'the man who knows everything about everything.'

'That's putting it strongly, perhaps,' said Grew, 'but I do pride myself on my wide range of knowledge.'

Randall saw that this was the continuation of a skirmish they must have been having before he arrived, and to break it up he said, 'I'd admire to hear you play something, ma'am.'

'I'll do it for you, Mr. Randall,' said Dora. She flung a short, triumphant look at Grew before she turned to the piano.

As Grew had said, her playing was not polished, and clearly self-taught, but this made little difference to Randall. She sang along with the chords in a low voice which was husky but controlled, and Randall found himself gripped by the song. He recognized it suddenly as an old Mexican melody he had sometimes heard Epifanio render in a cracked, wailing voice. Dora Morena used the English words, and, hearing them, he felt the meaning of the song for the first time.

*All in a golden cage,
There on the balcony,
A lady-lark was singing.
And crying to be free . . .*

He saw her in profile, and as he watched, he was surprised to see a tear streak down her cheek and leave a glistening line. She stared straight ahead and upward, and Randall knew she had forgotten Grew and himself and was singing only for her own heart.

When she was finished, she took her hands slowly, gracefully from the keys, folded them in her lap, and bowed her head and closed her eyes.

'Very sad,' said Grew, smiling. 'She's best at these sad things.' He looked archly at her, as though hoping to get a response, but she sat there quietly. Grew chuckled and looked at Randall. 'Dora's a prisoner, of course, like the lark she sings about and like most people, for that matter, Randall. A prisoner in a cage of her own making. Sometimes I believe she'd like to leave me. But, unfortunately, Tesqua isn't quite big enough yet to support a dressmaking shop, and if she should leave me, she'd be forced to take up her old habits somewhere. The difficult part is that she cannot seem to regard our relationship as the mutually advantageous arrangement that it is. She is subject—like any woman, in the long run—to romantic notions.'

Dora reached for the bottle on the table beside her again.

Randall rolled a cigarette, and that kept his hands and eyes busy. 'I come here to ask you something, Grew,' he said.

'Of course. I didn't suppose you made a long ride merely to enjoy my company.' Grew poured another

brandy into his tulip shaped goblet, then warmed the glass in his palms and sniffed the fragrance for a moment before drinking it. He looked up then. 'Well, what is it? What can I do for you, this time?'

'Well, the way you're saying it, it sounds like it's a favor. But, what I have in mind, you'll be doing yourself a favor, too.'

'Which,' said Grew, 'is the sort of proposition that interests me most—providing, of course, you've described it accurately.'

'Let me ask you something, Grew. Who do you think'll be the last man in these parts to sell out to you?'

'That's easy. John Colter.'

Randall nodded. 'I figured that. And I think I got a way to make him sell out quick.'

'Then let's hear it.'

'I located a herd of Colter's,' said Randall, finishing the making of his cigarette and hanging it in the corner of his mouth, 'somewhere between a hundred and two hundred head. Hid away real slick. Lot of bulls in the herd—breeding animals. Not a one of 'em branded. Running shorthanded, like he's been doing, he never had time. Kind of a gamble he took, there, to scratch along till the railroad came in. Or maybe figured with them sweet-tempered friends and neighbors of his, it wasn't a gamble.'

'Go on, Randall.'

'Well, the rest of it's simple. I aim to have that herd of Colter's. I can upgrade my scrubs with it, and next year have enough cattle to get a mortgage from the bank. After that, things'll just roll along natural, by themselves. But if Colter loses his prize stock, he'll be hurting—bad. He'll be as close as he'll ever get to selling out.'

‘Then why don’t you take these cows for yourself?’

‘I can’t do it with just the two of us. There’s only me and my Mexican hand. We got to get that herd down to our pens fast. Colter will be starting on his roundup any day now. Him and his neighbors help each other, you know. I figure I need six men, total, to work those cows.’

‘Four besides yourself and your Mexican?’

‘That’s right. And Cap Mackey and his boys ought to just fill the bill.’

Grew laughed. ‘Randall, you’ll budge those mountains to the west before you get Cap Mackey and his lads to do cow work.’

‘They can do it. And I reckon they will—if you tell ’em to.’

Grew poured another drink for both Randall and himself. As he turned back to sit in his chair again, a coughing fit hit him, and he staggered forward and supported himself a moment on the arm of the chair. When he recovered his eyes were watering. He wiped them with a handkerchief from his sleeve, swore, and said, ‘It’s this damnable weather lately. I’ll be all right as soon as the season behaves the way it ought to.’ He sat down heavily.

‘What do you say, Grew? Do I get Mackey and his boys?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Grew, lowering one eyebrow and looking thoughtful and shrewd. ‘I’d have to know a little more about it before going into a proposition like this. What makes you so sure you can drive these cattle off so easily under Colter’s nose?’

Randall moved from the chair, squatted on his heels, and with his forefinger traced an imaginary map in Grew’s thick carpet. ‘Here’s the box canyon, where Colter’s got ’em pastured. Water’s drying up there, and

they're fixing to leave it soon anyway. They wont take much pushing. We'll cut 'em out of the canyon, turn em south, and it won't be long before they smell the water on the government land. That's right here. There's a spring there, and Colter's made a low dam so there's a shallow water hole. Cows can smell water miles off, and when they catch wind of it, we won't have to push 'em—they'll run to it. Then we move 'em on down to my spread, brand and earmark 'em, and that's it.'

Grew thoughtfully poured another brandy. 'Perhaps you've got a good plan there.'

'Can't miss,' said Randall, straightening.

Grew rose from his chair abruptly. 'All right. I believe we'll both profit from this—I'll go along with you.'

'Figured you would,' said Randall.

Grew smiled. 'That's like you, Randall. You say, in utter confidence, you figured I would. You say that instead of thanking me. But I don't suppose I should complain. It's probably what I'd say in your place.' He went to his desk at the far end of the room, sat, and wrote a note. He handed it to Randall to read. It merely said, in guarded language, that Mackey was to help Randall in what he asked, and to come out to Grew's house for confirmation later in the evening. 'No doubt, you'll find Cap Mackey at the saloon,' said Grew. 'Or if not there, I'm confident you'll dig him up.'

'I'll find him,' said Randall.

'Better have one more drink before you go. We'll drink a toast to each other's success, Randall.'

'No thanks. I'm thinking about that success itself, not a drink to it.'

'As you will,' said Grew and showed him to the door. They waited, under the portales as the *pelados* saddled Randall's mount again, and then Grew stood there in the

darkness, smiling to himself, as Randall rode away. He turned slowly back into the house.

When he walked again into the *sala*, he saw that Dora had lowered the lights and was standing by the window, staring off into the black, prairie night, looking at the stars as though she wished she could reach out and gather them in. She was beautiful in the soft light—womanly and quite beautiful. He noted this with some surprise. Then quickly, as he felt this soft feeling of admiration come over him, he forced himself to retreat behind the hard, protective crust he'd learned to put between his mind and his sensibilities.

It would be impossible for him to have notions about Dora Morena, he told himself—quite impossible. He sought her company because she was the only woman in this Godforsaken purgatory whose manner and tastes approached those of the women he'd known back east. He was desperately lonely for the east, and the world he'd known there. He would like to see just once more a tastefully furnished drawing room with a chandelier of crystal prisms sparkling in candlelight and hear the murmur of soft, well-bred conversation all about him. Out here nobody appreciated that sort of thing—much less did they conceive of it. Out here nobody realized how hard he'd worked, and how long he'd fought, to make himself fit into that kind of world.

Hammond Grew had been born in a hovel in a slum and had started in life as a pickpocket. His intelligence, still untaught, had been a ratlike shrewdness in those days. But he had always sensed that he was smarter, somehow, than most people whose paths he crossed. He had always been clever at mimicking, and it wasn't long before he learned to mimick the high-born and wealthy. After that it became easier to take his place beside them and to start acquiring wealth of his own, at first by

frantic trading and complicated dealing, mostly in land, but which became less and less hazardous as he acquired wealth. He learned that money and power came easily to those who had a great deal of it in the first place.

He had never married—he had been too busy for that. His parents, if they were still alive, were still in the slum, as far as he knew. He didn't care to know any more than that.

Except that now the sickness had struck, and the doctors had sent him west, and now, for the first time in his life, he was lonely, and there was a terrible emptiness in him somewhere. It was down below the protective barrier he'd built long ago, and it was impossible now to get a clear look at it and decide what ought to be done about it. 'Dora.' He spoke softly and hesitantly to her—perhaps he spoke to her so for the first time.

She moved her head slightly, as though to turn toward him, then shrugged with the faintest gesture and continued to stare from the window.

'Dora. I've been thinking—'

Without looking at him she said, 'I want to be alone now, Hammond. I like it here alone.'

'Damn it, woman, this is *my* house!' he said.

'Then be a gentleman—like you're always pretending you are—and let me be alone here for a while.'

'What the devil's wrong with you tonight?' he said harshly.

'Nothing. I'm tired, Hammond. That's all.'

'Tired of me?'

'Yes, Hammond. Tired of you.'

The skin on the backs of his hands began to prickle. 'Because I'm not young and handsome—and ignorant—like that cowhand who was here? Do you think you prefer Randall to someone like me? Is that it?'

'Randall doesn't mean anything to me, Hammond.'

I'm just tired of you, that's all. You suggested an arrangement between us, and I agreed to it. That was my mistake—my stupidity.'

Hammond Grew trembled and worked his fingers in and out as he stood there in the semi-darkness. Suddenly he wanted to be admired; he wanted this woman to know him, to understand him, to appreciate him—but at the same time he hated her for her sudden coldness. And for being shopworn and second-rate—a man of his taste ought not to have to put up with anything second-rate. In his anger and confusion he blamed her for this. 'Listen to me, Dora!' he said, knowing that his words were running along the edge of madness and not really caring. 'Do you think someone like this rural buffoon, Randall, is better than I am? Do you think anyone in this whole benighted, ill-favored country can come up to me? Do you really think so?'

'I don't think anything, Hammond,' she said wearily.

He scarcely heard her. 'What do you think I was doing with him tonight? Why do you think I agreed to his proposition? And why do you think I made him explain everything in such detail?'

'I don't know, Hammond. I don't care.'

'Because in forty-eight hours I'm going to be rid of both Randall *and* Colter. What do you think of that?'

'I wish I'd never heard of you,' she said.

He walked to her swiftly, took her bare shoulder and spun her about to face him. 'Damn you, listen when I'm talking!' he shouted.

She laughed in his face.

He struck her across the cheek with the back of his hand, and after the first icewater shock of the blow she stood there, rigid, and faced him with defiance. He struck her again and again, and she kept her chin high and would not move.

twelve

THEY STARTED out in darkness, all six, and at dawn they met on the rolling, broken land near the mouth of Cat Canyon. Randall, Epifanio, Cap Mackey and Cap's three men. They conferred for a moment, then rode toward the canyon, each drifting apart a little on his horse, each as though he preferred to ride that way.

The men who worked for Cap Mackey were not employed by him steadily. They were loafers and hangers-on, and they were in Tesqua at this time of year for a number of reasons, ranging from flight from other parts to plain apathy.

There was Wilmer, whom Randall had already whipped. Wilmer had the wild look of a bad child and rode with his long back tilted against the cantel in a curious, angular way. Wilmer had been a farm boy in eastern Kansas until, drunk on moonshine whiskey one night, he had killed a man with whom he was fighting, killed him with a lucky pistol shot in the semi-dark.

People had been afraid of him after that, and he had liked the feeling. He had drifted in to Tesqua as he drifted anywhere, following his nose in a generally westerly direction, feeling a strange pull toward the setting sun which he scarcely comprehended and only half-recognized.

There was Sirois, a short, dark, stocky man with the chest of a small bull. He said very little, and when he spoke, it was in a deep voice and in a thick French-

Canadian accent. He did not express himself very well in English, and people sometimes got the idea that he didn't understand it either—they tended to talk to him in a kind of pidgin. But actually he understood a great deal and picked up a lot of information that way. He carried a hunting knife in his boot, and not as an ornament.

The third of Mackey's riders was a man they called Popeyes. His frame was larded with unhealthy sagging fat. His protruding eyes were a washed-out blue and pink around the edges. His fingers trembled continually and he carried a bottle of whiskey in his saddle roll and pulled upon it at intervals.

Epifanio edged his horse toward Randall and said, 'I do not like these men.'

Randall shrugged and said, 'You don't have to.'

They came into the canyon, and Randall showed them the cattle and then deployed them and gave them instructions. None except Sirois, the little Frenchman, was experienced at working cows, but Randall figured he'd make them do nevertheless. He showed them how to split and circle the scattered herd, working them all toward the mouth of the canyon and watching for the high-spirited animals who would attempt to break away in another direction.

'Once we get 'em headed out of the canyon,' he said, 'one or two'll just naturally take the lead. Like as not, it'll be one of the critters that didn't want to be worked down here in the first place. After that, there won't be much to it. Epi and I, we'll ride the point and keep 'em headed in the right direction. They might run when they smell the water down at the spring. It won't hurt. Let 'em do it.'

The men nodded, said nothing, glanced at each other, and glanced at Mackey. Epifanio, seeing these glances,

frowned, but Randall was too busy to think about anything but the herd.

Then they were moving out of the canyon, the rustle of the herd punctuated with a sound of clicking horns and an occasional low, muttering moan. Once Popeyes made the mistake of dismounting to lead his horse across a deep-cut arroyo and a bull charged him. He mounted again quickly, skitted to safety, and took a long pull at the pint of whiskey he carried. Randall rode over to him and said, "'They figure you're a different kind of animal off your horse. Better stay on it.' Popeyes belched, rubbed his nose, and said, 'I don't want no part o' the damn' critters.' But after his drink he fell to again and helped funnel the herd out of the canyon.

On the open prairie the cattle strung themselves out into a line, with an old mossy-head steer taking the natural lead, stretching its neck to bawl at the horizon occasionally and movin forward in a kind of ragged trot that was but a step faster than a walk. The dust rose, and with it the rich, leathery smell of the cattle. Randall rode the right point, and at the sight and at the sound of this moving herd, his blood seemed to sing; he felt that this was the real beginning of his empire. He wished his daddy might have been here in this moment, to see this, and to nod quietly and curtly as he did when he approved of something.

The sun was climbing now, and the sky was clear except for the tiny clouds just forming over the mountain peaks. The air was heavy and unreal. It should have had a sharp, clean bite in this season of the year, but instead it seemed as though the summer air had stayed over the land and had become worn and second-hand.

Mackey and Wilmer had been riding together on the flank, and now, with the herd settled down to a steady pace, both of them rode up beside Randall. Mackey still

wore his aggressive grin and stared directly at Randall as though challenging him to a contest in which the loser would be the one who turned his eyes away first. Wilmer hung back a little and glowered.

'Randall,' said Mackey, 'I been thinking about this. What happens if some of Colter's riders come along?'

'What happens? I'd say that was up to them.'

'You expect us to take on your fight for you?'

'You're not afraid of a fight, are you?'

Mackey laughed sharply. 'You know better'n that. But if you'd been in the army, Randall, you'd know there's more'n one way to win over somebody. Sometimes instead of waiting for a fight, you out-maneuver 'em.'

'Talk plain, Mackey. What's on your mind?'

'Anytime we moved a column back in the war, we had scouts out on the point. If there was trouble head, they took care of it. Or, if it was too big to take care of, they set up a warning.'

Randall frowned and thought this over for a moment. 'All right,' he said finally. 'Maybe I better send someone on ahead.'

'Might as well be Wilmer and me,' said Mackey, 'for all the good we're doin' as cowhands.'

'Might as well,' agreed Randall.

Mackey pointed at the broken land ahead. 'We'll move up a couple o' miles. If we see anything looks like trouble, we'll fire a shot. We'll meet you at the water hole. Once we get past that we're not likely to run into anything.'

Randall nodded, and Mackey gestured to Wilmer, and the two of them rode off at a light gallop. When Epifanio, across the point, saw them leaving he spurred his own horse and circled over to Randall's side.

'Where do they go, *cuate*?'

Randall explained Mackey's plan and added, 'Should have thought of it myself.'

Epifanio's dark face was as expressionless as a ripe plum. He grunted softly. 'Listen, *cuate*, I don't like this so much.'

'What's eating you now?'

'I don't know. I don't like these men.'

'I wouldn't sleep in the same bedroll with any of 'em myself. What's the difference?'

Epifanio pointed south where Mackey and Wilmer were disappearing in a feather of dust over the next rise.

'Maybe I better go with them, no?'

'Maybe you better stick here and help me run these cows.'

'You don't need me now. I think I will watch these two *ladrones* for you.'

'Damn it, Epi,' said Randall, 'you'll do like I say.'

'Not this time, ch? I think I go take a look.'

'You'll stay here! said Randall.

Epifanio almost smiled. 'Maybe you are going to keep me here, *cuate*? Maybe you are going to use your fists,

Randall stared at the Mexican. The censure implied was clear enough— Randall couldn't make anybody do anything without using his fists or his gun these days, Epifanio was saying. Randall finally said, 'All right, get out of here if you're so lazy. I'll run this herd without you.'

'*Si*. I will follow them.

'I don't mean follow them,' said Randall. His blood seemed to be pounding in his ears. 'I mean get out. For good.'

Epifanio looked at Randall for a moment, then shook his head. 'No, *cuate*, you don't mean that.'

'I mean it, and what's more I'm damned tired of

hearing you tell me what I mean, and what I don't mean, and what I should do, and what I shouldn't do.'

'Listen, *cuate*, you don't know what you are saying.'

'I know what I'm saying!' Randall was shouting now. 'If you don't want to do things my way, you don't have to stay around!'

Epifanio sighed deeply. 'I will see you after, *cuate*,' he said, 'when your head is more clear.' He kicked his horse in the ribs abruptly, wheeled it, and rode off, heading south.

Randall, still jogging along with the herd, found himself trembling inwardly. He was in the grip of some strange madness, and he couldn't shake it off. He was touchy—he wanted to fight everyone, even Epifanio, and the way he felt maybe he even wanted to fight with himself. That was all a man could do in a world where everything and everyone was hostile. Fight. Push ahead. If anyone stood in the way, knock him down—gun him down—and don't stop to listen to his reasons.

He grimaced, as though with a bitter taste, shook his head, and kept riding.

The sun climbed steadily, and the warmth of the morning grew heavier. The cattle, shuffling along, raised a cloud of dust. The mossy-head in the lead began to swing his muzzle about. He was an old, speckled steer with a body as tough and twisted as a cypress root, and a set of horns that were trying to grow into a corkscrew shape. He seemed to know he was ugly and short-tempered; he seemed to run in the lead to keep the others from getting too close to him. Randall thought he knew just how that old steer felt.

Suddenly there was the sound of a distant shot. Randall stiffened in the saddle, stared south, and heard two more shots. He glanced back along the herd, where Sirois, the Frenchman, and Popeyes, were riding flank,

and tried to decide whether or not he could leave the cattle alone with them and ride ahead.

The old mossy-head stretched his neck suddenly, emitted a long, drawn-out bellow, and began to trot forward. Instantly, as though they were all of one mind, the animals all along the line began to trot with him.

Randall spurred his horse. He put it into a full gallop over the broken ground and topped the rise some distance ahead of the herd. He saw a flash of light far ahead as the sun glinted in reflection for a moment on the water hole. He was across Colter's border now, and in the government strip. He rode until his mount began to throw sweat, and abruptly, as he came over another rise, there was a clear view of the waterhole. He saw a figure on the ground near it. He recognized Epifanio.

He raced to where the Mexican lay and swung from the horse before it had fully halted itself.

Epifanio was lying on his face. Randall saw the blood almost immediately.

'Epi!'

The Mexican moved his outflung arm slightly. Randall, kneeling by him, touched his shoulder, then turned him over. There were two splotches of blood on his shirt, and in the splotches almost imperceptible, dark holes.

'Epi! What happened?'

Epifanio tried to moisten his lips with his tongue. His eyes were dull, as though a film of dust had settled on them. 'Listen, *cuate* --'

'You're all right, Epi. You're just fine. Take it easy, now.'

'The water hole,' said Epifanio.

'It's all right,' said Randall. 'Just hold still here. We'll doctor you up--'

'Poison,' said Epifanio, his voice weak and hoarse. 'In the water hole, *cuate*. Wolf poison.'

‘What’s this, now?’

‘Señor Mackey . . . and the other one.’

‘They shot you? They the ones that did it?’

Epifanio nodded.

The rage in Randall was so intense that he was numb with it. He stared at Epifanio and there seemed to be a buzzing in his ears. He could neither think nor feel in this moment.

‘Hey . . . *cuate*,’ said the Mexican, whispering almost inaudibly.

‘What is it, Epi—what is it?’ Randall bent closer. His own voice was strange and distant in his ears.

Epifanio grinned, showing his strong, yellow teeth. ‘*Adios, cuate*,’ he said.

‘You’re all right, Epi! We’re going to fix you up fine!’ Randall’s voice had risen, and he knew that he spoke in panic.

‘You got to love somebody, *cuate*,’ said Epifanio. ‘You hate too much. This also is poison—’

‘Just stop talking now. Just lay there easy.’

Epifanio started to nod. He brought his head forward, and then suddenly it fell to one side. Randall heard his last breath come out of him in a soft gurgle. The grin disappeared as his lower jaw fell limp.

‘Epi!’

Randall touched his shoulders as though that might somehow bring him to life again. Randall stared at him until the tears came and blurred his vision.

Moments later he rose slowly. The sun-shriveled land and the nearby sand hills seemed to rock back and forth. Rage suddenly exploded within him. He turned and roared at the empty sky:

‘Mackey! Wilmer! Come on—show yourselves! I’m going to kill you—you hear?’

There was not even an echo.

And then, as he stood there, the herd came over the rise, with the old mossy-head still leading them. They were in a full lope, and their own dust rose among them until they seemed to float along in it. There was a sound of thunder in their hoofs. Their horns flashed like swung sabers.

Randall quickly looked for his horse, and found it nowhere in sight—it had gone on to graze somewhere after he had left it, or, for all he knew, to drink at the poisoned water hole. He took another moment to measure his chances of running out of the path of the galloping herd. He shook his head. They were too close now; he could not possibly escape them afoot.

And he wondered in this moment : *Is this the way we both die, out here on this scarred land, a lifetime away from the rest of the world? Is this where the Randall blood was meant to die out?*

He looked at Epifanio's body again. The herd was almost upon him now; he could see the wildness in the eyes of the lead steer. Suddenly he threw himself on the ground, behind Epifanio's body, so that the dead Mexican formed a kind of bulwark. He pushed up against that still warm body, lowered his head, and covered the back of it with his crossed arms.

The herd came over him like the wall of a flash flood and there was a terrible roaring in his ears.

thirteen

THE ROARING became distant thunder and dissolved into a sound that was like a thin, high wind—a wind without let-up, and also without change. He was in a curious state; he was aware of nothing but the wind and of a cold grayness it brought, yet he could think; he could understand where he was, and how he had come here.

He was huddled against Epifanio's huge body—unless the charging cattle had by now kicked him away from it. And Epifanio had ridden ahead to protect him; the Mexican's sharp, clean senses had known there was something wrong. He must have seen Mackey and Wilmer poisoning the water hole. Strychnine was sold at the mercantile for those who wanted to kill wolves, and either of the men could have carried enough in a saddlebag to kill Randall's cattle when they drank. Yes, his, Lige Randall's cattle—his by the law of might and possession, no matter how unsure of this Epifanio might have been.

And Epifanio had gone and got himself killed for Randall. Why did he have to do that? Maybe Grew had been right when he said a man had to be all good or all bad to get anywhere. Epifanio had too much good in him. That had been his weakness.

Randall swore and was not sure whether he gave voice to the oath or not. He was thinking crazy now. He couldn't string things together in his head. Maybe he was dying. Maybe he was already dead.

Somehow he didn't care.

Maybe, he thought, if he was dead, he'd come across Epifanio somewhere again. That would be right and good, it seemed to him. That would make things the way they always had been.

He wished he'd gotten himself killed first, though. Epifanio shouldn't have gone and done what he did—just for him. He would miss Epifanio. Miss him? God, thought Randall, suddenly going cold, he would live in a black and bottomless pit without him.

I loved him, thought Randall. I guess I never loved another living creature, but I loved that damn' fat Mexican . . .

The distant thunder began to return, and presently there were jagged colored flashes before his eyes, woven into insane, momentary patterns. To his surprise, the sound of thunder receded. It was quiet suddenly, quiet as a tomb.

He opened his eyes. His head throbbed and burned.

The day was bright, the day was still—he was huddled into the burning ground behind a warm and bulky shield. He raised himself slightly, slowly. His vision cleared as he blinked and he looked at Epifanio—what had been Epifanio. Sharp hoofs had chopped his broad back into a mass like red jelly, but Randall could see from the other hoof marks in the earth on either side of the corpse that Epifanio's body had deflected the herd, caused them to split momentarily, so that Randall himself had been scarcely touched. Perhaps a hoof or two had grazed him—perhaps that was how he had been knocked unconscious.

He stood over Epifanio's body. He stared for a pulse-beat, then nodded and said, 'Thanks, *cuate*. Thanks, *amigo*.'

He felt the tears running free on his cheeks, and didn't care.

Then he turned slowly toward the waterhole, and felt the rage mount in him like something immense and burning from the bowels of the earth. He saw the cattle around the water hole. Some were already dying, staggering away from it in mad circles; some were on their sides, kicking. Others were drinking, and cattle behind them were pushing and hooking with their horns to get to the water. The bellowing of the cattle already dying was pain-ridden and sickening.

Then, through the dust, he saw figures—men and horses—two men, two horses. He recognized Mackey and Wilmer. They had come back—to make sure as many cattle as possible died. He wondered where the other two were—Sirois and Popeyes—and looked all about, but didn't see them. No doubt they'd already headed to town to tell Hammond Grew his plan had worked out successfully.

He thought of Hammond Grew, and there was so much hate in his blood now that it stung. Grew, Mackey, Wilmer—these men had killed Epifanio. He should have had sense enough to know Grew would try to keep him from getting too big. But he wasn't thinking so much of that now. He was thinking of killing, that was all. He was thirsty with the need to kill.

He walked toward the waterhole.

The cattle were between him and the two men—they didn't see him at first. He circled the bawling, jostling, milling, dying herd, and walked through the dust they had caused to rise.

Wilmer saw him first. Wilmer, holding his horse, was standing some yards from Mackey, one hip angled sharply to the side in that peculiar loose stance of his. He was grinning at the dying cattle. He happened to turn his head, saw Randall, and his grin opened into a stare of disbelief.

Randall stopped and laughed wildly, crazily at Wilmer.

Wilmer drew his gun.

Randall drew and shot before Wilmer could squeeze the trigger. The heavy slug struck Wilmer in the center of the belly, and knocked him backward, spinning. Wilmer began to kick himself in a flat circle on the ground, gasping.

At the sound of the shot both Wilmer's and Mackey's horses bolted. Mackey stared for a moment in surprise as the reins tore from his grasp, and then he began to run. He ran wildly toward his horse at first, and when he realized he couldn't catch it, he veered suddenly and headed up the rise, toward the same clump of junipers from which he had once shot a steer Randall was trying to rope. He threw himself into the concealment of the bushlike trees.

Randall, in a queer kind of daze, watched him run—he probably could have hit him with a careful aim, but instead he watched him. And then, when Mackey had disappeared behind the foliage, he looked down at Wilmer. Wilmer wasn't dead yet. He was gasping and retching blood and trying to move. His eyes were open, but Randall didn't think he saw anything.

Lige Randall was suddenly sick. He realized that this man, who would surely die, was the first man he had ever killed. He hadn't thought it would be like this. A man ought to die sudden and get out of your thoughts; he shouldn't stare at you unseeingly like that.

He wanted to retch, but he fought himself and held it back.

He faced the bushes where Mackey was hiding.

'Come out of there, Mackey!' he shouted, and his voice, a little out of control, was almost a scream.

There was a shot from the junipers. Randall heard the

bullet, buzzing in low pitch, go by his ear, then strike a rock somewhere behind him and ricochet with a shrill whine.

At first he wanted to throw himself upon the ground, find some kind of cover and shoot it out with Mackey. Then, in a split-instant, the shape of a memory came to him—something his daddy had once said, though he didn't have time to hear all the actual words that went with it. What his daddy had said was this: 'Never do what the other fellow expects you to do.'

He crouched and began to run toward Mackey, zig-zagging over the broken ground.

Mackey fired again. Randall saw dirt rise in a tiny geyser beside him. He dodged to one side, veered back, and kept running. He was going upslope now, toward Mackey. There was some natural cover as rocks and ridges of broken ground came between him and the clump of junipers on the crest of the small ridge.

He still felt the driving desire to kill, though it was sharp and painful in him now. It seemed to him that if he could kill Mackey he would relieve himself of all this rage within him, that this rage had been inside him all the time, except he hadn't realized it before. Strange—he must have hated Mackey with a blood-lust before he had ever dreamed the man existed. Hated somebody, anyway. Yes, he knew now that he had been wanting to kill for a long time. He would kill again. Wilmer was not enough—it had to be Mackey, too. And afterward, he'd go to the town and hunt Grew out and kill him.

And after Grew?

He didn't know . . . he didn't care.

He felt a terrible blow on his arm, and he heard Mackey's gun explode at the same time. An instant later he saw gray smoke tear itself away from the junipers.

There was no pain at first—just the terrible force of the blow. He staggered back, and half-spun with it. He wanted to clutch at his arm and find out exactly where he had been shot, but he did not.

He dropped, to his right. He found himself in a shallow gully. Then the pain came along, and his left arm began to burn and throb. He wanted to writhe and moan, but he forced himself to be still.

He watched the junipers above. There was no movement, no sound from there.

Mackey wasn't half-brained about this kind of thing. Mackey would figure he might be shamming and wouldn't show himself just yet. But eventually he would—if Randall could stand the pain that long. He kept himself rigid. He didn't even dare turn his head to look at his arm and see how badly his arm was bleeding, and whether it seeped out or came in spurts. His only chance to finish Mackey was to be as still as death now.

He tried to think of things to keep his mind off the pain. So this was what it was like to kill, he thought—and he wondered if his daddy had known the same abandon, the same drunkenness when he had killed. Killing was a miracle, as birth was a miracle, except that it was evil and had to be washed away afterward, and the only way you could numb yourself to the memory of having killed was by killing again.

Crazy thoughts. He almost laughed aloud; he caught himself just in time.

He saw movement in the juniper. He saw a patch of color, that was not quite the color of the shadow all around it. He was tempted to fire at it, but he waited instead. A branch moved. As he stared a small area in the pattern of the bush seemed as though it might be Mackey's head. He wasn't sure. And even if he had been sure it would have been too small a target to hit with a

snap shot, the way he lay there with his gun arm resting on its elbow.

Suddenly he heard Mackey's voice, calling out to him.

'Randall!'

He kept watching and didn't answer.

'Randall! I know you're playing possum! You hear me, Randall?'

He watched, and it was almost as though he didn't hear. There was one thought in his mind, to kill Cap Mackey, to knock him out of the way, as you knocked aside the brush when you rode through it. He hoped that Mackey would die more cleanly than Wilmer. He remembered how the Dutchman had died, that day in the hot sun more than a decade ago, when he had dared to step across the line his daddy had set. The Dutchman had died very cleanly, merely falling from the saddle as though he had suddenly slept, and Randall remembered that a black hole had appeared in his forehead—he had seen it only momentarily as the man fell—and that there hadn't been any blood. Maybe the Dutchman had bled afterward, but Randall didn't know about that, because his daddy had waved him away when the other ranchers picked the man up.

'Now, look here, Randall!' Mackey was calling. 'We don't have to be damn' fools about this, do we?'

Let Mackey talk; let him talk up a storm. Randall would wait. Then kill him. No one had ever told him it was wrong to kill, though he'd heard that other folks believed this. Quite a lot of them, apparently, believed it. His father had taught him differently. He could remember evenings by the big adobe fireplace when his father had sat drinking whiskey, sipping it straight from a big tumbler, and sipping it slow, and Randall with his arms around his knees, there on a buffalo skin in front of the fire, listening. Big-eyed and listening.

'Humanfolk may be smarter'n animals, Lige,' his father would say, 'but they ain't as honest. They try to make out they *ain't* animals. They're just two-legged animals, that's all. And like with all animals—the strong ones get the meat.' Or the smart ones, his daddy should have added. That was the trouble—Randall hadn't been smart enough, and now he had trouble on his hands. But when he killed Mackey, and then Grew, they'd leave him alone for sure—no one would be fool enough to try to outfox him after that.

'Randall, listen to me! I was actin' on orders! I got nothin' against you personal, Randall!'

Before today he might have listened to something like that. He might have said to himself maybe there was something in what Mackey said, and maybe Mackey didn't hate just him in particular, and maybe it was just the way things had got all mixed up, and maybe Mackey still had a right to live. He would have had a little soft part of him thinking that way before. Now he knew, for sure, that to survive he had to be hard all the way. *Bad* all the way, Grew had said—and maybe that was the right way to say it . . .

His left arm had stopped throbbing now, but it still ached terribly, with a steady, allover ache. His head was light and a little dizzy, and he hoped he wasn't losing too much blood. He hoped he wouldn't faint—not before Mackey showed himself. The worst of it was he still wanted toretch, and he had all he could do to keep that down.

Suddenly he saw Mackey's hat appear on one side of the juniper clump. He noticed that the hat swung slightly, and so he knew that it was on the end of a pistol, not on Mackey's head. He almost smiled. And he kept waiting.

The hat disappeared. There was another stretch of

silence—this one seemed longer than any of the others to Randall. Suddenly Mackey's head and shoulders emerged slowly. He was rising sideways from a crouch, and he came from behind the junipers and stood erect at the same time. He held his pistol pointed in Randall's direction. He shrugged his beefy shoulders in that curious gesture of his, as though throwing off a load, and then he took one step forward.

Randall fired three times. Mackey jerked with each shot, as though struck by an invisible, swinging pole. He did not fall. *'Men do queersome things when they get shot,' Randall's daddy had once said. 'No two of 'em ever take it the same.'* Mackey lifted his head and screamed at the sky suddenly. The way his mouth was spread he seemed to be grinning—it was that same challenging grin he had turned upon Randall before. It made his scream seem almost like laughter. Then Mackey took three or four uncertain steps down the slope, toward Randall, and suddenly he stumbled casually, as though he'd tripped over a rock. He fell flat on his face, twitched several times, and after that he was still.

Randall rose slowly. He was dizzy, and his arm and shoulder carried so much pain there wasn't room for any other feeling. He looked at his sleeve and saw that it was soaked with blood. He held his wounded arm away from his body, stiffly. He picked his way slowly, unsteadily up the broken slope to where Mackey lay.

Mackey's head was twisted so that one cheek was to the ground. His mouth was open in an idiotic sag, and his eyes were wide open and dull. He looked, Randall thought wildly, like the steer he had shot in this very draw the day Randall had fallen from his horse. This was the look of death.

Why did he hate this look? Why was he tortured with a feeling of horror and shame?

Lige Randall shook his head viciously. It didn't make any difference, he told himself, making his mind form the words so that he could hear them, as though spoken by his own voice. He couldn't let himself be bothered like this because he had killed his first two men. He would have to shake this feeling. He still had another man to kill.

He took several deep breaths and forced himself into a greater degree of calm. He turned away from Mackey's body slowly and picked his way down the slope with deliberate steps. At the bottom of the draw he sat upon a rock, found his jackknife in his pocket, and cut away the bloody shirt-sleeve. He saw where the bullet had gone clean through the flesh of his upper arm, the entrance wound a tiny, puckered hole and on the other side a jagged tear. He took a calico handkerchief from his pocket and bound the wound.

He stood up and looked about. Several dozen cattle about the water hole were dead now. He saw his horse gazing calmly some distance up the draw and marveled that it had not drunk from the spring. Then, looking a little more closely, he saw that it had found moisture in little puddles seeping from the underground spring before it came fully to the surface. He walked to his horse, picked up its reins, and led it, at a walk, back to where Epifanio's body lay. The horse skittered a little at the smell of Epi's blood, but he held it firmly.

He stood looking at what was left of Epifanio for a long time. He sighed finally and said, 'I'd like to cover you up, *cuato*, against the buzzards. But I can't right now. I'll come back and do it some time.'

Then he mounted slowly and painfully and started his mount off in a rough walk toward the town of Tesqua.

fourteen

IT WAS noon when Randall rode up to the pink adobe wall surrounding the patio of Hammond Grew's hacienda. A black-and white shepherd appeared, barked at his horse's heels, and then one of Grew's Mexican servants came out of the heavy wooden door to the courtyard. When he recognized Randall, he swept his hat from his head.

'The Señor is injured!'

'It is not a great class of injury,' said Randall, though by now his arm hurt with a great, dull spreading ache. 'Where is Señor Grew?'

'He is not here now, Señor. You must allow me to fix your injury.' The servant had drooping lids and a drooping mustache; he was one of these villainous-looking Mexicans who were not at all villainous—Randall would bet he kept a fat wife and a brood of children and kept them faithfully.

'I have no time,' said Randall. 'It is necessary that I find Señor Grew.'

'He has gone to the town.' The servant showed a troubled scowl. 'I *think* he has gone to the town, Señor.'

Randall looked at him sharply. 'How do you call yourself?'

'Perfecto Eleazar Tranquilio Francisco Ezequiel Echeverria.'

'Well, Perfecto,' said Randall, 'what is wrong?'

'Wrong, Señor?'

‘There is something wrong in this house. Your face demonstrates it.’

Perfecto considered that for a moment, distorting the heavy brows over his sad, drooping eyes, then he said, ‘That you dismount, Señor, and allow me to fix your injury. I will tell you the story.’

Randall sighed impatiently and swung from his horse. Perfecto took the reins. ‘A little moment, Señor,’ he said and led the horse off to be watered and unsaddled before Randall could overcome his physical weakness enough to object.

Perfecto opened the patio door for him, and he stepped inside. There was a well in the center of the patio, and a bucket of water, already drawn, hanging on the post. Randall sloshed all of it over himself, and breathed deeply at the relief it gave him. He stood for a moment, swaying slightly, and finally put his hand out and let himself down slowly to a sitting position on the edge of the well.

The sun was high and bright, and the patio seemed the place of a dream. The outlines of everything—the cactus, a wooden wine cask, a wheelbarrow—were abnormally sharp. Yet everything lacked depth, as though he lived within the confines of an extraordinary clever painting rather than in the world itself.

He had lost blood, he told himself; that was why he was thinking crazy like this.

He had to find Grew and kill him—this was still driving him. But he had killed twice now, and he knew now that he didn’t like to kill. He had never even wondered before whether he would like it or not; he had supposed that when the time came to kill he would do it, and that would be that. But he was sickened with what he had done, and knowing that this was weakness, he hated himself.

Perfecto returned in a remarkably short time—or perhaps in Randall's dream-state it only seemed a short time—and he carried a basin full of cloth strips and a clay dish of some sticky black substance. He took away the makeshift bandage Randall had put on his own wound and then began to wash Randall's arm.

'Señor, I am concerned for the *patron*. He is drinking more than is good for a man now. When he brought the Señorita Morena to this house, we thought it was good. They were not sanctified, of course, but we could see, in the beginning, that Señor Grew was happy. Soon they began to fight with each other, Señor, and last night the fight, I think, was a very big one.'

Randall, listening with half an ear, said, 'What's this you're putting on my arm now?'—meaning the black paste Perfecto had brought in the dish.

'It is from the *quaco*, which is a weed. I learned of this from an Indian doctor. It takes the poison out of a wound.'

Randall grunted noncommittally.

'This morning,' said Perfecto, resuming his story, 'the Señorita was gone. There was a letter. I cannot read so much English, and, in truth, now that we speak of it, I cannot read any language. But the cook, she went to an Indian school, and she can read some English. She told us the letter said the Señorita was leaving Señor Grew and abandoning him forever.'

'It would not surprise me,' said Randall. He wished Perfecto would hurry up with that bandage—he seemed to be trying to live up to his name with all the care he put into it.

'All this morning,' said Perfecto, 'Señor Grew stormed about the house. First, he wanted to know how the Señorita had departed. Ysidra—he is my third cousin—had saddled a horse for her very early. He struck

Ysidro for this. Finally he directed that a horse be saddled for himself and rode from the house. Therefore we think he has gone to the town.'

'I'll find him there,' said Randall.

'Please, Señor. If you find him, will you talk to him? Will you explain to him, Señor, that these difficulties a woman causes are not true difficulties?'

'Señor Grew and I,' said Randall, 'will have only a brief conversation.'

Some time later Randall rode into the town. The streets were almost empty; it was siesta time. The air was still, and it seemed like summer. The air was heavy, hard to breathe. Horses at hitching rails were restless, switching at flies with their tails, and swinging their heads back and forth impatiently, as though they had been waiting too long now for the cool weather and were beginning to fret at its tardiness.

Randall passed the new church, and its adobe walls, thoroughly dry now, glittered in the sun. It seemed deserted. He walked his horse into the center of town and saw, as he approached the courthouse and 'Gran Quivira' saloon, that the stage, which came every two weeks, was loading passengers and baggage. Perhaps a dozen people were near it, several of them the usual loafers from the courthouse steps and the wooden walk in front of the 'Gran Quivira'. He rode toward the group, feeling as though he moved through a dream.

He came upon them quietly, and at first no one noticed him. The stage driver and his assistant were busy piling baggage atop the coach. Suddenly Randall noticed Dora Morena standing by a wooden post, waiting and holding a small traveling case. There was a bruise on her cheek, and she seemed pale. Randall noted in passing that she was indeed leaving Grew, and leaving all of Tesqua be-

sides, but that wasn't of much concern to him. Finding Grew was the only purpose that would stay clear in his mind.

He halted his horse for a moment and looked up and down the street again. Grew might be in his office, further down, toward the stream and the cottonwoods, or he might be in the saloon itself. Wherever he was, it would be better to come upon him without warning. *'Showin' up sudden,' Randall's father had said, 'is like throwin' cold water in a man's face. For a second he don't know what to do. You can use that second.'* Of course, Grew might already be warned if Popeyes and Sirois had reached him, although there was also a chance they didn't know Randall had survived the stampede to the water hole. Anyway, none of this mattered. He was going to kill Grew, and he would find the way to do it when he finally found himself looking at him.

The stage-driver hopped to the high front seat and placed his coiled whip in the little brass tube made for its handle. 'All right, folks! We're fixin' to leave!' he called.

Dora came forward and started to step through the open door.

'Dora!'

That was Hammond Grew's voice, pitched close to a shout. He had stepped out of the saloon. He swayed a little as he stood there. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes glistened.

Dora Morena whirled from the open coach door and stared at him. The loafers all around the stage lifted their heads with new interest. 'I'm leaving, Hammond,' she said, her voice low, hard, and cold. 'You're not stopping me.'

'Damn you!' shouted Grew. 'You're not leaving!' His narrow chest was rising and falling rapidly, and he

seemed to have difficulty in breathing. 'What are you going to do? Be a street woman again?'

Randall saw Dora Morena's face, and he saw hate and ugliness spring into it as suddenly as an arrow from nowhere. *There's always something'll make somebody senseless mad, his daddy had said. Say the right word to the right person and they won't even think straight.*

Dora Morena whirled suddenly, snatched the driver's whip from its brass cup, opened its coils, and began to lash Grew with it. She cut him clean across the face with the first blow. He screamed, crossed his arms in front of his face, and tried to back away. He was against the wall. She struck him again and again, the leather singing and snapping, until he was a mass of sears and cuts, and all the bystanders, including the stage-driver, stayed where they were and stared in shocked surprise. Grew fell suddenly to his knees; then she turned, tossed the whip to the driver, and said, in an unnaturally bright voice, 'Let's go, *amigo*!'

She stepped into the coach. The driver snapped his reins, cracked the whip over the horses' heads, and the stage rumbled away. A cloud of dust rose in its wake. Grew got to his feet and staggered from the porch into that cloud of dust in the middle of the street.

'Dora! Come back!'

He began coughing until each spasm made his frail body jerk as though struck by a bullet. He doubled up suddenly and fell flat on his face.

Randall sat in his saddle and continued to watch. He had come to kill Hammond Grew—but somehow this sick little broken man lying in the road didn't seem to be the Hammond Grew he had both hated and feared.

Several men bent over Grew, and then one of them ran across the street and a moment later returned with Doc Levi. The little doctor was in his shirt sleeves, but

he still wore his high, starched collar in spite of the heat. He saw Randall and glanced at him curiously for a moment before he bent over Grew. Then he stood up and said to the men around him, 'You want to leave him in the street? You can't carry a little man like this into my office?'

They picked him up and took him into Levi's place.

Randall dismounted, hitched his horse, walked over there, pushed through the crowd, opened the door, and entered. Levi had Grew on a leather couch. Randall closed the door behind him.

The doctor turned his head and glanced briefly at Randall. 'What are you doing here?'

Randall nodded at the man on the couch. 'Is he going to live?'

Levi shrugged. 'Does he want to?'

'I wouldn't know,' said Randall. 'But I'll tell you this, Doc. If he don't die on that couch, I'm going to kill him myself.'

Levi calmly turned to his patient again. He held his wrist in one hand and his gold watch in the other and took his pulse. 'I'll tell you something you won't believe, Lige Randall—maybe you won't even understand it. I'll tell you why you want to kill this man. I'll tell you why you want to kill anybody.'

'Never mind the sermon, that's Tod Hurley's business.'

'Yes. What we do, each of us, is not so different. We try to give life to people, when we can. We *have* to do this—we are as crazy to do this as you are 'to take life away. Why? This is the part I don't think you can understand, Randall. This way we give life to ourselves.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

The little doctor sighed. 'You want to kill. Randall.'

You want to be the big dog in the pack. You think you are doing this as a favor to yourself, but inside, Randall, so far inside maybe you can't even feel it, you hate yourself, too. You think you are a brave man? I will tell you, Randall. You haven't the courage to give yourself the punishment you know you need, so you try to give it to everyone else. You try to hurt everybody who comes near you.'

'Shut up!' said Randall. 'Shut up before I decide *you* need a lesson!'

Levi turned and rose. He stood and stared with dignity at Randall. 'Before you decide? You are God himself to decide what I need? What anybody needs?' He took a long breath. 'Get out of here, Randall,' he said, 'before I spit on you.'

'Fix him up!' said Randall, his voice almost out of control. He pointed to Grew. 'Get him patched so I can kill him fair!'

The doctor calmly walked across the room to a basin on a marble-topped stand. He poured water and began to wash his hands. 'You are lucky, Randall. You won't kill him, and by doing so kill some of yourself. He is already dead.'

Randall looked at Hammond Grew's body. He looked upon death for the third time that day. He was getting to know its look well. He grimaced, hesitated for another moment, then finally turned slowly, and walked out of the doctor's office.

He crossed the street and went into the saloon. The men in there looked up when he entered, stared at him for a moment, then turned away. They resumed talking in low voices, pointedly ignoring him. He went to the bar and a space was cleared for him immediately. He stood alone.

The bartender with the sad, hound dog's eyes came

up to him and stood there, waiting for his order without speaking.

'Whiskey,' said Randall.

He drank in a gulp, hoping the bitter taste would clear his head, but it did not. He poured again and stared into the glass . . .

One time at the big house there had been a thunderstorm and he had been unable to sleep. He was about twelve or thirteen. He had lit a candle and had come downstairs. His father had been sitting in his favorite chair, a big Mexican equipale of woven leather strips, staring into the fire and with a large glass of whiskey in his hand. The bottle beside the chair was half empty. Lige remembered it had been full when he had gone to bed.

'What are you doin' up, Lige?'

'I got lonesome, Daddy.'

His father nodded. 'It gets lonesome here. Without your ma it gets lonesome.'

'Why don't we live in town, where there's more folks around?'

'Because folks hog-tie you, son. And no Randall ever lets hisself get hog-tied.'

'None of 'em ever tried to hog-tie me, Daddy.'

'Don't talk like that, now. You listen to what your daddy says. Someday you'll find out it's so.'

'But I don't ever see anybody. I don't have anybody to talk to.'

'You don't need nobody to talk to, son. You're a Randall.'

'I don't see how that makes any difference.'

'Don't make a difference?' His father turned his great bulk slowly in the chair and swiveled his eyes upon young Lige as though they were field pieces. 'Don't make a difference?' He tossed his tumbler of whiskey to one side,

letting it clatter and spill on the floor, not even noticing the noise. He rose and towered over young Lige. He stood there on his spindly legs and breathed hard so that his great buffalo's chest expanded and contracted visibly. He struck Lige suddenly across the face with his open hand. He did not strike him hard, but that made little difference because Lige wouldn't have felt even a hard blow. The shock came from the fact of it. 'Goddam you, boy!' roared Rufe Randall, 'Don't you never let me hear you say that again!' . . .

Looking into the glass Lige Randall felt suddenly afraid and alone, and didn't know what to do about it. His daddy had never taught him what to do for this, he had never admitted that a Randall could be either afraid or alone.

Suddenly he heard Pat Colter's voice. 'Lige Randall!'

He turned. She was right behind him. She was dusty, as though she had been riding hard, and she wore that silly-looking straw hat thonged to her neck and thrown back over her shoulder blades. He said sourly, 'What do you want?'

'My father's looking for you, Lige Randall.'

'He is, is he?'

'He's wearing a gun,' she said. 'Looking for you and wearing a gun.'

fifteen

IT WAS quiet again in the big room. Randall knew that everyone was staring at Pat Colter and himself. He felt like whirling toward them, waving his pistol, and ordering them to mind their own business. Instead he forced himself to keep his face expressionless as he said to Pat Colter, 'How come you're telling me this? You figure I need a warning?'

'That's like you,' she said.

'What's like me?'

'Thinking of yourself. I didn't come to warn you.'

'Did John send you here?'

She shook her head. 'It was taking him quite a while to get ready, and I rode on ahead. He heard you had driven off his cattle—and he said he was coming to look for you. I came to ask you not to fight him.'

'Not to fight him?' Randall's eyebrows rose. 'A man comes looking for me with a gun, and you want me not to fight him?'

'Don't draw on him, Lige! Promise me you won't.'

'Now, why should I promise that?'

'I don't want you to kill my father, Lige Randall.'

'Ever think there's a chance of him killing me, too?'

'I know that. I don't want him to kill you either. There's been enough trouble. I want it all to stop. Killings go on and on—one leads to another. You know that, Lige!'

Randall shook his head grimly. '*I* didn't start this trouble.'

She looked at him intently. 'You probably believe that. You probably believe you didn't start anything—I won't argue the point with you. But you have a chance now to keep it from going any further. Please, Lige—I haven't any shame in this—*please* don't draw your gun on my father!'

'You want me to stand where I am and let him gun me down, I suppose.'

'He won't do that, and you know it. He'll wait for you to start it.'

Randall cocked his head. 'You don't know much about this kind of thing, do you? Sometimes it's hard to say who makes the first play. Sometimes these* things just happen.'

'Don't let this one happen, Lige Randall. If you never do another decent thing in your life—I'm asking you now—*please don't let this happen!*'

'I don't see exactly how I can stop it now,' said Randall.

The door of the saloon banged open, and there were hard footsteps across the floor. Randall looked up and saw the Reverend Tod Hurley walking toward him. Hurley's deep young voice filled the room; it could be felt in the floorboards, through the soles of men's boots. 'I know how you can stop it, Randall,' he said.

Randall looked at him coolly. 'You're in the wrong place, Reverend.'

'There's no such thing as a wrong place for me,' said Hurley. 'That's why I came out to this country.' He held out his hand. 'Let me have your pistol, Randall.'

'What?'

'Let me have your pistol. That's how we can stop this thing.'

'Nobody takes my pistol. That's the one thing *nobody* takes.'

‘Let me have it. I’ll keep it for you till Mr. Colter cools down.’

Randall shook his head. ‘Reverend, you better go back to your churchhouse and stop meddling on the outside.’

‘I’m not just a Sunday preacher, Randall. I’m here to fight against wrong whenever I see it, and wherever. This is wrong, what you and John Colter are about to do—and you know it. You know it in your heart, because everybody knows a thing like that. That’s the good seed in all of us, Randall. Now let me have the gun!’

Randall glared at the young parson. He knew Hurley was right, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit it, even though, in a way, he suddenly wanted to admit it and somehow, by doing so, clean himself out inside. But there was a pounding of anger in his blood, and it was too strong to stop. ‘It’s too late, Hurley,’ he said. ‘I’m going out to meet him.’

‘Please, Lige!’ Pat Colter put her hand on his arm. ‘Don’t!’

He shook her hand away. ‘Let me alone, both of you! This is no business for women and preachers!’

‘This is very much our business, Randall,’ Tod Hurley said. His voice had suddenly become low, so that it was close to a rumbling whisper. ‘If you won’t give me that pistol, I’m not going to let you go out there.’

‘You’re not going to *let* me?’ Randall almost laughed. ‘Reverend—when a Randall wants to go *nobody* stops him.’

Hurley took one backward step then. He brought his fists up in front of him, knuckles turned toward Randall, the left arm slightly ahead of the right, elbows crooked and his forearms vertical. He spread his feet in a peculiar way, then bent his knees slightly. It was almost a comical stance—and Randall suddenly remembered that stance

from pictures of English boxer's he'd seen in books and prints from the east.

Randall sighed. He had no real quarrel with Hurley, except that his damned meddling got in the way. The best thing to do would be to knock him down and put him out of commission as quickly and painlessly as possible.

He rushed Hurley suddenly, pumping and swinging with his good arm.

He was not there. Randall was striking the empty air. The Reverend's fists came at him from a distance, like projectiles, and struck him several times, on the face and in the soft part of his belly. He grunted. The Reverend's fists were remarkably hard and carried a surprising sting.

Suddenly Hurley was holding up his hand. 'Wait a minute, Randall—hold it!'

'You had enough already?' Randall glared back.

'Your left arm—you're injured. I won't fight you that way.'

Randall's mouth opened with surprise. 'What in hell are you talking about?'

'It wouldn't be fair,' said Hurley. 'Now, listen to me, Randall. Try to see the good sense in what I'm saying—'

In this moment he was off-guard. Randall didn't question the good fortune of this turn of events. He sprang forward, cat-quick, and swung his good arm with all his might at the Reverend's jaw. That big, handsome jaw was just made for a target.

Hurley's eyes rolled upward, his knees bent, and he fell to the floor as Randall stepped back. He stayed on the floor, on his hands and knees, shaking his head slowly.

Randall glanced at Pat Colter. She was staring at him in disgust.

He laughed wildly, stepped past Hurley, stomped to

the door, and went outside. He looked up and down the street. It was empty. That meant to Randall that Colter was already here. Down near the livery stable a rust colored dog with slatter ribs picked his way across the open space, sniffing at the dust as he went along.

Then, far up the street, at a point some distance beyond the livery stable, John Colter suddenly appeared. He came out into the middle of the thoroughfare and began walking toward Randall, slowly.

Randall walked to the middle, too. '*Never wait for 'em to come to you,*' his daddy had said. '*Always go to them.*' He began walking, matching Colter's slow pace, closing the gap.

A slight breeze had sprung up, an irregular breeze that came from behind John Colter. Colter's boots were stirring up little puffs of dust with each step. He was walking like an Indian, taking short, lightfooted steps, his toes turned slightly inward. His older man's stiffness was gone; he looked as though he had somehow been able to loosen all of his joints. 'This was no fool sodbuster he was facing, Randall suddenly realized---this was a man who had used a gun before.

They kept walking toward each other until they were perhaps fifty feet apart. That wasn't close enough to shoot with much accuracy, but it was close enough to talk. Colter halted, and Randall halted, too. Randall noted how Colter stood with his hips thrown slightly forward, and with his right hand in a loose hook near his holster.

'Randall!' said John Colter.

There was no fear, no hesitancy of any kind in his voice. Randall remembered the day he had watched John Colter in the "Gran Quivira", calling upon young Bob Petersen to come home; he remembered him standing there unarmed and keeping everybody under control

just by the quiet assurance of his voice. That same confident authority was in his voice now.

'I heard you were looking for me, Colter,' Randall called back.

'That's right,' said Colter. 'I think you know why.'

'Maybe you better tell me why.'

'You took some of my cattle out of Cat Canyon, Randall. Took 'em and poisoned 'em.'

'You've got things shuffled up, Colter. The cattle I took weren't branded. And I didn't poison 'em. Cap Mackey did that—and he won't be passing out any more wolf-bait, where he is now.'

'All that's your affair, Randall. All I know—is, you took them cattle. They was mine—and you knew it.'

'All right, Colter,' said Randall. 'What do you figure to do about it?'

'If it was anybody else, Randall, I figure I'd expect to be paid for them cattle.'

'And since it's me?'

'Since it's you, I'm sayin' get out o' this country, Randall. We don't want your kind here.'

'I'm not asking anybody to want me here. But I'm here—to stay—and you might as well get used to it.'

'Then we better lay down the cards, I guess.'

'Go ahead—it's your play!'

'I'm waitin' for *your* play—standin' right here, waitin'. You want to be the big man in this country, Randall—here's your chance.'

Randall felt himself tremble inside, and he hoped there was no outward sign of it. He was undecided—and his daddy had always said it was fatal to be undecided. You had to be ready to carry the fight; you had to *want* to do it. If Colter would only move his hand toward his gun Randall would act—he'd be able to make his own draw, then, without even thinking about it. That was

what he found so terrible now : thinking about it.

Somewhere down the street, beyond John Colter, the late-afternoon breeze began to pick up the dust in a tiny swirl. The spiral plume moved across Randall's line of vision, slowly at first, and then more swiftly for a moment just before it disappeared. A dust devil, forming itself this late in the year . . . he couldn't remember ever seeing one in this season before. Maybe Epifanio, with his dark notions about such things, had been right, after all. Maybe it was a *brujo*—maybe his father's restless, out-cast soul coming here to tell him what to do. That was what he needed now; his daddy's advice—

Or did he? He had been taking his daddy's advice all along, hearing the little echoes of his father's voice out of the cave of the past whenever he had to make a decision. And he'd been going deeper into bitterness and misery with every step he'd taken. . . . What would happen this time if for once he didn't listen to the echo? What would happen if he forgot he was a Randall, now—the way he'd really wanted to do so many times before his father knocked it out of him?

It was quiet now, in the hot street, quiet as though this was a hidden place in the vast mountains to the west—a place no human had ever found. Pat Colter and Tod Hurley had come to the door of the "Gran Quivira" and, although Randall kept his eyes on John Colter, he sensed that they were watching. There was a portion of a second when everyone was still, when even the breeze was still, and time and the whole world seemed to have come to a dead stop.

Randall moved his hands slowly and deliberately, so that Colter would not mistake his purpose. He brought them to the buckle of his cartridge belt. He opened it, spread his hands, and let the belt, with its heavy, holstered pistol, fall to the dust.

He heard his own voice call out to Colter. The words came out all by themselves—he did not remember forming them in his mind before he spoke them. He could scarcely believe he himself was speaking.

‘I’ll pay you for the cows sometime, Mr. Colter.’

And then, leaving his weapon in the middle of the street, forgetting it, he walked slowly to his horse.

Tod Hurley stepped toward him as he mounted. ‘Lige—’

‘Go away, preacher,’ said Randall. ‘Go away and leave me alone.’

‘I just want to say, Lige, that was the bravest thing I ever saw a man do.’

Randall sighed and said, ‘You talk too much, Reverend. But I reckon that’s part of your business.’

Hurley smiled at him, and Randall had to scowl and turn his head away to keep from grinning back. He mounted. He walked his horse into the street, then turned it west. He kept his eyes straight ahead, but from their corners he saw that folks were coming out of cover and showing themselves in the open again. They were all staring at him. He didn’t care. He felt tired and empty. He wanted to go someplace and rest now. He wanted a little oblivion.

A figure scuttled toward him from the left; he turned his head wearily and saw Dr. Levi, his hair awry and his domelike forehead covered with sweat.

‘Randall! With your arm like that, where do you think you’re going?’

‘Doc, go find somebody who’s sick,’ said Randall.

‘Look,’ said the little doctor, ‘get down off that horse, you crazy cowpoke. Let me fix that arm for you.’

‘It’s a scratch, that’s all.’

‘You want to die from a scratch? You think you couldn’t die if the fever gets into it?’

‘It’s got medicine on it. Grew’s Mexican put some kind of Indian medicine on it.’

‘Then, for God’s sake, let me see what kind of medicine! You think I’m too old to learn something?’

Dr. Levi reached for Randall’s reins. Randall jerked the horse’s head away and kicked the animal into a gallop.

sixteen

HE RODE hard over the open prairie west of the town. His horse had been worked too much this morning; its chest began to heave, and the lather began to fly from its skin. Randall barely noticed this. He kept his eyes on the blue mountains head, as though he had been stripped of every sense but an instinct to ride toward the lowering sun.

A short distance from the town the land began to be scarred and broken again. The earth was hard, and the sand glittered; often where it rose momentarily, there was an outcropping of rock atop a low ridge. Tough foliage fought for life here. The grass was wiry, and the bottle-green junipers had twisted limbs. A lizard scuttled from one rock to another. A jackrabbit popped into sight, then ran, showing its long heels. A sluggish red-tailed hawk sat on a dead branch and presently soared away heavily, its wings fully spread.

'Randall!'

It was John Colter's voice, shouting from somewhere behind him. Randall looked back. Colter, his long, weathered body loose in the saddle, was racing after him.

Randall spurred his horse. The tired animal stumbled, then found its pace again, stretched its neck and galloped, making loud gasping noises.

He wondered vaguely why John Colter was chasing him. To ask him *when* he was going to pay for those cattle? *John, I don't have the slightest idea when or how*

I can pay . . . Maybe sometime a long while from now, when I've made a stake, if I can ever find a way to make a stake again . . .

It would be impossible now to hold on to the new Double Running R and keep it going all by himself through the winter. Maybe with Epifanio he could have done it, but Epifanio was gone now, and there wasn't anybody to take his place. There probably wasn't anybody in the whole country who would want to throw in with Lige Randall now—

'Randall!' Colter shouted from behind. 'Hold on—you hear?'

He kicked his horse again. Its forelegs suddenly gave way. It stumbled and fell, and Randall flew from the saddle. He struck the ground on his injured arm, and the pain made him cry out involuntarily. At the same time there was a sharp stabbing pain in the side of his chest.

He was on his back, trying to breathe. He couldn't seem to control his limbs. The sky above him was turning in a slow pinwheel.

John Colter suddenly appeared over him. Colter was rubbing one of his long gray mustaches and looking down at him gravely. 'Well, you damned young fool,' he said, 'it looks like you got yourself stove-in again.'

Randall had to push each word out painfully. 'I already told you . . . you'll get paid . . . just leave me alone, now.'

'Stubborn cuss, ain't you?' said Colter.

Then all of Randall's pain seemed to thicken and cover him suddenly like a dark blanket. He was not exactly unconscious, but he felt strangely apart from everything that went on. He knew that others joined Colter—Pat Colter among them—and he knew that presently he was carried to a wagon bed and laid there, wrapped in blankets. It was dark when they reached Colter's house,

but he recognized the place somehow, and after a while knew that he was in the same bed he had once occupied for several weeks. He hadn't enough will to object.

He knew that Dr. Levi came. He remembered hearing him say, 'The same ribs—he broke them again. Why he isn't dead *this* time, I couldn't tell you. If he can keep quiet, he'll live. Maybe. I'll tell you honestly, the more I see of the human body the less I know about it.'

One morning there was sun streaming into the room. He looked at the windows, saw that they were slightly frosted, and knew that it was cold outside. Winter had come.

'Feelin' better today?' John Colter was in the room, looking at him.

Randall nodded.

'Well, take your time. Won't be much to do now till spring, anyways.'

'John—about what I owe you—'

'Now, don't start frettin' about that. I got it all figured out. First off, not all of them cows died from that poison—there's still a few left. Second, that whole business is past and gone. I reckon we start all over again now, like none of it ever happened.'

Randall stared at the old rancher. He couldn't think of anything to say.

Colter lit his pipe and made clouds of foul-smelling blue smoke. 'I reckon we'll all make it through the winter. I got my hands lookin' after your herd while you're stove-in here. I expect you can lend *us* a hand when you're all patched up. I expect we can all work this thing together, the way neighbors ought to do.'

'I expect we can,' said Randall.

Colter smiled dryly. 'Nice feelin', to be somebody's neighbor, ain't it?'

'It seems that way,' said Randall. 'I can't tell you one hundred per cent yet. It's a kind of new feeling to me.'

'You'll get used to it, boy,' said Colter. He took his pipe from his mouth, started for the door, then turned. 'I was a hellion just like you once, and I got changed and got used to it.'

Randall smiled. 'Then I reckon a fellow can get used to 'most anything.'

'He can even get used to women, if he's around 'em long enough,' said Colter, nodding. 'And that reminds me. They're fixin' up some breakfast for you downstairs. Think you might like Pat to bring it in to you?'

'I wouldn't mind,' said Randall, frowning, 'but I'm not so sure how that would set with the Reverend Tod Hurley.'

'Well, I wouldn't worry none about that. It seems like I was wrong about them two.'

Randall looked at him questioningly.

'I figured Tod come out to this country 'cause he was sweet on Pat. Fact is, they're right good friends--the way they both know about all that fancy stuff they have in the East--but the moonlight romance just ain't there between 'em.'

'No?' Randall tried to keep the excitement out of his voice, but it wasn't very successful.

'No, sir. I reckon Pat's like her Ma.'

'How do you mean?'

'I reckon she's more like to be sweet on a reformed hellion!' Colter put his pipe back in his mouth, chuckled, and left the room.

A moment later Pat Colter came in with a tray of breakfast. She wore a Sunday dress, and her hair had been carefully fixed. She said, "Good morning!" and made a fuss over arranging the dishes on the tray. She wouldn't look directly at Randall.

Randall wished he knew what to say. His daddy had never told him anything about dealing with women. And if he had, Randall thought suddenly, chances were it would have been the wrong advice anyway. Well, he'd figure this one out for himself, because his father's presence had gone out of his life at last. Like a dust devil disappearing over the horizon. Lige Randall was on his own now.

'Nice day,' he said to Pat Colter. It was the first thing that came into his head.

She nodded and smiled and looked out of the window.

'Yes,' she said, 'it's a beautiful day.'

'We get lots of 'em in this country.'

'I've been noticing that lately,' she said.

'Figure on sticking around a while?' he asked.

She looked at him then. 'I don't know. How about you?'

'Well, I expect I'll be in these parts for some time,' said Randall.

She nodded again, then said, 'Oh, I almost forgot. Here's a sack of tobacco.' She put it on the bedside table.

'Thanks,' said Randall.

She went to the door. She turned and looked at him. He was looking at her, and he had not yet touched his food. 'We can talk again,' she said, 'when you're feeling better.'

Randall grinned. 'I'm feeling better already,' he said.

His grin stayed with him after she had closed the door. It felt good. It came to him that it was the first time in his life he'd ever tried out a real, wholehearted, man-sized grin.